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["CAN YOU FORGIVE ME?" HAROLD SAID, PLACING A STRONG ARM ROUND LOIS. "I HAVE BEEN A BRUTE!"]

NEARLY WRECKED.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

"From the first I objected to the visit; and I was sure by her manner that what I feared would happen has happened," said Miss Rebecca Stanford to her confidential maid and foster-sister. "Miss Lois has a lover."

Charity laughed.

"She's had more than one, it strikes me, miss, for all your strict watch and ward over her; and what's more natural that she should be admired? She's prettier than any picture I've ever seen; and why she shouldn't get married I can't understand."

Miss Rebecca frowned, first at the open letter in her hand, next at Charity.

"You are a very foolish old woman," she said, severely; "at your time of life you should know better than to talk in such a fashion. How many married people do you know who are as contented as we in our single state?"

"Well, I'm not so sure that we'd be single, miss, if we had our choice; but I never had a sweetheart. I was always ugly, you see; and you—well, begging your pardon, miss, you used to be fond enough of admiration, and you had as many lovers as any lady in the county, till you broke all off with Mr. Harefield; and Miss Grace——"

"Silence!" said Miss Rebecca, fiercely. "How dare you rake up the past—let it be forgotten wholly! I had good reason to renounce my lover; and sister Grace died of a broken heart. Do you wonder I wish to save my niece similar experience? Of course she is of age, and can therefore please herself; but I will use my utmost endeavour to prevent her marriage with this unknown Harold Argyle."

"I doubt but you'll fail, miss," Charity answered, bluntly. "Young hearts will turn to young hearts, and Miss Lois ain't one of your weak-minded sort. When does Mr. Argyle come?"

"This evening. I am thinking he will not relish his welcome."

"Humph! perhaps the gentleman will know how to hold his own. Anyhow, it's to be hoped you won't spoil two lives just because you and Miss Grace were unfortunate;" and allowing her mistress no time to reply, Charity sailed from the room majestically, passing a young girl on her way.

She was tall and slim, and what Oliver Wendell Holmes would call a "stained blonde"—that is, she had yellow-brown hair, and whilst her eyes were hazel in the shade, they were amber in the sunshine.

She was pale with a clear, healthy pallor. There was not the slightest hint of delicacy in Lois Stanford; and for the rest, her face was proud and pure, and the firmness of the chin did not in any way counteract the tenderness of the exquisite mouth.

Into Miss Rebecca's presence she went, with no sign of fear in her manner, and only a slight access of colour showed that she was in any way moved.

Miss Rebecca looked up disapprovingly as she entered.

"Am I to understand," she asked, "that this letter has been written with your knowledge and sanction?"

"If it comes from Mr. Harold Argyle, aunt, yes."

"So," bitterly, "all my care of you has been in vain. I have tried to teach you how utterly foolish it is to put your trust in any man; I have endeavoured all through your youth to make you understand that only the woman who is free is happy."

"Are you happy?" the girl questioned, pitifully. "I fear not; and, aunt, you have told me often that my father was my mother's lover as long as he lived."

"He was the exception which proves the rule; and we Stanfords are, unfortunately for us, a loyal race. You will go far before you find your father's equal."

A little smile curved the beautiful mouth.

"I have found my hero."

Miss Rebecca brought her shapely hand down heavily upon the table.

"Girl! girl!" she cried, "can I not make you see with my eyes? Is wisdom quite gone out of fashion? Am I nothing to you—I who have loved and cherished you so long? Renounce this so-called love of yours, and let us be happy together. Why will you touch old wounds? Is it nothing to you that Grace, my sister, the sweetest and dearest soul on earth, died broken-hearted because of a man's treachery, that all my life too was spoiled because I was fool enough to trust the brother of the man who killed my sister?"

"Poor aunt!" said Lois, stretching slender, gentle hands to her, "I hardly wonder that you are so embittered against men; but—but Harold," she spoke his name shyly, "is true as steel. I could not doubt his truth—I dare not!"

"No," snapped Miss Rebecca, "you would rather die! We women are all alike; each thinks she has won the noblest creature on earth, until the hour of awakening comes—as it must soon or late, whether to maid or wife. Child, be warned now; better live in dull content than have supreme happiness a little while, and after that, misery. I have no longer any control over you; if you choose you can go your own way. But Lois! Lois! remember how dearly the old woman has loved you."

"That I never can forget," Lois answered, kneeling down beside her; "but if I could betray my love, should I have any claim to kinship with the 'Loyal Stanfords?' Dear aunt, let Harold plead with you himself—he is wiser and more eloquent than I."

"He has a facile tongue—that is the true interpretation of your words. Lois! Lois! I hoped to make you wise, and sceptical of a man's faith—I have failed; well, then nothing remains for me but to interview this Mr. Argyle, and make such arrangements as I may. Of course I cannot enforce your obedience; you may defy me if you will."

"Dear aunt! we will not quarrel—you and I. You have been mother and father to me, and not even for Harold's sake will I forget these things."

"It is easy to protest," Miss Stanford said, scornfully; "I prefer actions to words."

Lois rose; she looked both hurt and indignant.

"I have no more to say," she answered, proudly. "Perhaps, one day you will learn my chief desire is to please you, and that I honestly and warmly love you; but that no power on earth shall induce me to treat Harold badly. But I am willing to wait for your consent to our marriage."

"I am tired of the discussion. Leave me in peace a little while; and I would wish not to see you again until your hero's arrival."

Not a word did Lois say as she went out. She was very, very angry, but she was pitiful too, and, remembering all Miss Rebecca's loving care, she would not speak one syllable that might hurt her.

She lunched alone, Charity waiting upon her.

"There, miss," she said, with a fond glance at the girl, "don't you go to worry yourself. Miss Rebecca's a bit mad to-day, and you must allow she ain't got much cause to think well of the men. It strikes me the Stanfords ain't a lucky family. There was Miss Grace, who died because she couldn't marry the man she loved—she never had much will of her own, else she wouldn't have let folks know she cared so much for Mr. Sebert Harefield; then, Miss Becky, that's what we called her then, got jilted by 'Wild Dick Harefield,' and has never been the same since. Next, your father married, and his wife died when you weren't more than two years old. He soon followed her. But your mother used to say, with her pretty laugh, that she had come into the family to change its fortunes, because she was a Lacy, and declared the Lacys always were lucky. And, Miss Lois, you are her living image."

For the remainder of the day the girl was left very much to her own devices, and towards evening she dressed carefully, wearing a white gown Harold had approved; crimson roses were at her throat and waist, giving out their heavy sweet odour, and her mystic eyes shone with expectant happiness.

From her window, half-hidden by its bower of honeysuckle, she saw her lover's arrival, and her heart beat fast; it seemed to her that centuries went by before she was summoned to her aunt's presence, and then neither her Harold nor Miss Rebecca wore a reassuring look.

The interview had evidently not been pleasant, but Harold hastened to his *fiancée's* side with a loving gesture, and taking her hand, said,—

"Miss Stanford is pleased to regard me as an adventurer, simply because I have confessed that I am not legally entitled to the name I bear. I have asked that you may hear my explanation. I do not think you will misjudge me. I have practised no deception, the whole thing is a farce."

"Doubtless you regard it as such," said Miss Rebecca severely, "but I hold a contrary opinion, and, if your preface is finished, we will get to the story."

"The whole case, madam, lies in a nutshell," retorted Harold. "Through the death of one of my mother's relatives, I came into my fortune, subject only to one condition, viz., that I bore his name in lieu of my own. For the rest, I can assure you I am of gentle birth, that my people were honorable. I am Harold Harefield!"

"*What!*" cried Miss Rebecca, shrilly, whilst she grew white as death itself. "What did you say? Who was your father?"

"I am the son of Sebert Harefield and his wife Majorie Argyle Braithe."

The old maid rose to her extremest height; never had her stately figure been more imposing, never had her stern, handsome face been so hard and malignant.

"Have you never heard," she asked, icily, "of your father's doings in the past? It was he who broke my sister's heart, it was his brother who made me what I am—and you dare to ask me for my niece's hand! She had better die now in the flush of her youth and beauty than marry a Harefield. Seek your bride elsewhere; I will move heaven and earth rather than consign her to such misery. Lois, listen to me. These Harefields are bad, root and branch; if this lover of yours keeps his faith so far as to make you his wife, he will only break your heart by his neglect or brutality. Do I not know? do I not know?" striking herself mercilessly upon the breast; "I have tried them, I have proved them. Richard Harefield, the elder brother, was my accepted lover, against my father's wish. Oh! he knew them well, but I was blind and passionate. He left me! and Sebert broke my sister's heart. Stay with me, Lois; none will ever love you more unselfishly than I. I am an old woman—I will not keep you long—and—and oh, my dear, my dear! you shall marry whatever man you will, so that no drop of the Harefield blood runs in his veins."

Harold was even as white as the passionate old woman; but speech was not easy to him then, and it was Lois who broke the heavy silence.

"Aunt," she said, gently, "it is not well to remember the sins of the fathers against the children, and I trust Harold with all my heart and soul——"

"As I trusted Richard Harefield," cried Miss Rebecca, "trusted him to my own most bitter cost. Oh, girl! girl! I loved your father, I love you—surely my affection calls for some return."

"I am not unmindful of your care," Lois answered, quietly, "but I cannot forget that I have pledged myself to Mr. Argyle. Dear aunt, I will not leave you yet. I am willing to wait until you have learned to know my lover's worth. I owe you too much to act the part of an ingrate."

Then Harold broke in impetuously.

"I do not know how my father or his brother may have sinned against you and yours; I only feel you are unjust to punish me for any fault they may have committed long ago. I only ask you to try me—but I won't promise to wait an unconscionable time for my bride."

"No; I am willing to believe that: the Harefields love well for awhile, but their ardour soon cools. Lois, if you indeed care for me, if there is any spark of the Stanford honour and loyalty in you, you will promise to remain with me until your twenty-second birthday. It is for your good I ask this—you will then see of what an enduring quality your lover's passion is."

"I promise," Lois said, firmly, but Harold protested that this arrangement was manifestly unfair.

"No," said Lois. "We are both young enough to wait; and nothing can shake my faith in you. But I owe Aunt Rebecca duty and affection—not even for you can I forget these things—she has suffered much."

"Thank you for your remembrance of me, niece, although indeed I doubt if you will keep your word. Harold Harefield Argyle, where is your father?"

"Dead, madam! I stand all alone in the world even as Lois does."

"How did he die?"

"My mother's loss broke his heart."

"Then Heaven has heard my prayer. I am almost content. He suffered at the last—there is still justice under the sun," and her handsome old face was awful in its hate and scorn. "I have prayed for retribution year in and year out; sometimes I think I have wearied Heaven with my petitions. He is dead! he who murdered my pretty Grace. And his brother Richard, what of him?"

"I know nothing of my uncle; he has probably been dead these many years."

She drew a sharp breath; a look of utter anguish darkened her faded eyes; then she said, scornfully,—

"Yes, he died years ago, or he would have sought help even of those he robbed. And now—go! I hope I shall never see your face again; I never wish to hear your name any more. If at the close of a year you return to claim my niece, I cannot say you nay, because even now she is her own mistress; and if she prefers a Harefield and misery to her own people and content, I am powerless. But a Stanford never strikes in the dark, and so I honestly tell you I will do all that lies in my power to prevent this most accursed marriage. Lois, what you have to say to your lover, say quickly—the hospitality of this house is not extended to him."

"I do not ask it, madam. Whatever were my father's faults, at least his son should be the last to hear them. Lois, come out with me. Miss Stanford, I wish you good-night and a more charitable spirit."

And being alone, the old lady hid her face in her trembling hands.

"He looked and spoke like Richard," she

moaned. "It brought back all the past! I remember how I loved him, how I suffered for my faith. I will save Lois yet, if I can; I will stick at nothing to accomplish my end."

Out in the gloaming, in the sweet old garden, with its lilies and roses, its multitudinous perfumes and faint melodies, for the birds' songs had well-nigh ceased, stood the young lovers.

"I'll swear to you upon my honour, dear," the young man said, eagerly, "I never knew one word of this. I did not even guess our families had ever been in any way connected. And I say it is an infernal shame that I should suffer for wrongs perpetrated before I was born. Perhaps, after all, these things exist only in Miss Stanford's imagination, and so the only thing left us to do is to marry at once."

The girl laid her clasped hands upon his breast.

"Dearest," she said, "aunt is not given to fancies, and Charity has told me this same story, although, of course, I did not guess that you were in any way involved in it. I know that my aunt suffered cruelly; but I know, also, that you will never give me an hour's unnecessary pain; and just because I am so sure of your love and faith, I ask you to wait a year for me? It is not long."

"Great Heavens! not long! Are you content to let twelve months go by without seeing me, hearing from me?"

Aunt does not forbid our correspondence, and I owe her so much that at least it is my duty to a certain extent to study her wishes. And during the time of our probation I shall be doing my utmost to reconcile her to our marriage. If then she does not relent I will not tax your patience further."

Harold looked dissatisfied.

"In the meantime she may induce you to think favourably of some other man."

Lois laughed slightly.

"No; our male visitors are few and far between, and Aunt Rebecca advocates single blessedness most warmly. Dear Harold, cannot you trust me even as I trust you?"

"I should be wretched if I could not. And although my disappointment is very bitter, I will not urge you to do violence to your conscience. Perhaps, in my heart of hearts, I hold you dearer for your self-denial and your gratitude. But you will write me often. Every little detail of your life will have interest for me. All that you think, or say, or do will be of moment to me."

She clasped her hands behind his head.

"I have no secrets from you. I like to think that there is perfect confidence between us."

It was growing quite dark in the garden now, the time was fast approaching for Harold's departure. He took Lois in his arms.

"Sweetest and dearest, swear to be true to me. You are more to me than life!"

"I could not be false if I would. You hold my heart in the hollow of your hand."

CHAPTER II.

Miss Rebecca Stanford looked something more than anxious, as sitting before a window she gazed earnestly out upon the road beyond the garden.

It was three months since Harold Argyle had gone away, and he had written with most conscientious regularity; but, she argued, "the fiercest love dies out the soonest," and she hoped that, despite her niece's steadfast belief in her lover, that long before the year was gone a rupture would have occurred.

Still, it did not please her to know that only this evening Lois had been accosted at the gate by some man unknown. Dim as her eyes had grown, Miss Stanford was able to ascertain that he was not Harold Argyle. He was much smaller, and stooped a little.

Comforting herself that Lois would surely tell her all that had occurred on her return, Miss Rebecca tried to interest herself in some very abstruse work; but it was growing dark rapidly, and she became angry as well as anxious about the girl's non-appearance.

It was with a sense of relief that she heard the click-click of high heels on the gravel path, and looking up saw Lois approaching. Lighting the lamp, she waited for the girl to enter, and it seemed to her that the usually swift step was less swift and light; and as she peered through her spectacles, she saw her niece was very pale and weary-looking.

She waited for the confession she felt must come; but Lois, merely remarking on the beauty of the night, sat down in a distant corner, where the shadows lay deepest.

"You have walked too far," said Miss Rebecca. "Where have you been?"

"Only through the meadows; but I am tired, and will go to bed."

"Did you go alone?"

Lois hesitated, blushed, grew pale again, then said,—

"No; not alone."

And as she volunteered no confidence, Miss Rebecca was too proud to question her further; but as she lay sleepless that night a sudden resolve came to her. She saw now how easily she might break the ties which bound Harold to her niece.

"I never thought," she muttered, "that a Stanford could play fast and loose with any man's heart; but perhaps it is all for the best, and Lois is very young, she naturally likes admiration. But if she meets this man again I will write Harold Argyle. He comes of a proud race, if vicious; and it will be my duty to discover who this clandestine lover is."

The following evening Lois again left the house as quietly as she could, and there beyond the gate was the figure of a man.

"I have not failed you," she said, coldly. "Are you so false yourself you can trust no woman's word? Did I not tell you that any help you might receive from me would be given conditionally? If you will not keep your promise, I am absolved from mine. Understand I will not permit you to approach this house."

The man looked into the proud young face, with a feeble protest in his own.

"You are very hard upon me; for the sake of my love and waiting you should be merciful to me."

"Merciful!" Lois echoed. "How dare you ask for compassion, you who have had none on those who adored and trusted you! And what love you ever felt died long ago. Only your own necessities have brought you here a suppliant. Here is money enough to keep you comfortably for at least a couple of months. When it is gone you must apply to me; but if possible do not apply personally."

Stretching out a greedy hand, he almost snatched the purse from her.

"You are very good," he said; "but if you would only add a little leaven in the way of kind words to your good deeds I should be much more grateful. Like your aunt, you have a bitter tongue."

Lois heard him in silence, her lip curving disdainfully, and when he had ended she said, quietly,—

"I think the less you say of my aunt the better; and understand, that not for any regard for you do I give you assistance. Now go! and I hope it will be very long before I see you again!"

There was something of Miss Rebecca's severity in her aspect as she went towards the house. Charity, meeting her, was amazed by her stern looks. Usually Miss Lois was as gentle as she was bright.

The girl seemed very weary as she leaned against the open window, and Miss Rebecca regarded her with sorrowful, disappointed eyes.

"Lois," she said, "is there nothing you can tell me?"

She started, and trembling a little answered,—

"Nothing, dear aunt."

The old lady rose, and going towards her niece said, entreatingly,—

"What are you hiding from me? Lois, have we lived together so long, and yet you cannot trust me? Dear child, I have tried to be both mother and father to you."

"And you have succeeded," the girl answered, quickly. "Oh! auntie, how can you doubt that? But I have nothing to tell you. You know all the little history of my life."

"I do not. What man is this you are in the habit of meeting?"

Lois was startled out of all semblance of composure.

"I cannot tell you," she cried, distressfully. "Do not ask it. I will not meet him any more of my own free will. Let me keep my secret."

Miss Rebecca wore her stormiest look.

"Keep your wretched secret; but I thought that the Harefields held the monopoly of falsehood and deceit. I did not think a Stanford could stoop to intrigue; but I tell you candidly that if I learn that you still meet this man, who dares not openly sue for your hand, I will write at once to Harold Harefield," and with that she left the room; and sinking upon a couch, Lois broke into hysterical sobs.

From that day a cloud came between aunt and niece; there were no more long and pleasant chats in the gloaming, no more affectionate embraces or kindly words. Miss Rebecca was suspicious, and Lois was miserable; her secret weighed heavily upon her, and she dared confide in no one—no, not even in Harold, because she had given her word to keep silence, and a Stanford's word was his or her bond.

A month went wearily by, and nothing fresh had occurred to arouse Miss Rebecca's suspicions, and she tried with might and main to forget they had ever existed, but just when she was most trustful she happened to see Lois with a man she felt certain had been her companion on those two previous occasions. The old lady had attended the bi-weekly service at the church, and was returning home alone when through the gathering dusk she recognised her niece's tall and slender form. Her companion's face she could not see, his back being towards her, but the clear indignant voice addressing him reached her, as for a moment she halted under cover of a friendly hedge.

"You should be ashamed of yourself to trade upon a woman's fears—a woman's generosity. I told you at our last meeting that I could give you no more for two months at least, and now you threaten that if I withhold supplies you will go to my aunt. I think I could almost kill you rather than you should do that. With God's help I will keep this secret hidden from her——"

Poor Miss Rebecca! she waited to hear no more; with hasty trembling steps she made her way home. Oh! what had Lois to fear from this man? Of what folly had she been guilty? A little sob broke from her pale lips.

"Poor child! poor child! she would fain save me distress!" and then again, when she stood in her own room. "God knows, I have tried to rear her wisely and well; but I am an ignorant old woman, and I have failed in my efforts."

She went downstairs, and gave herself up to bitter thoughts, and then suddenly she resolved to write Harold without delay. He would be angry that Lois could deceive him, and so their contract would be broken, and that being done she would know how to deal with this man who lived by her girl's bounty. With her, to resolve was to do, and before Lois had returned Charity had been despatched with the hastily-written epistle, and the old lady felt a grim satisfaction that she should "kill two birds with one stone." Not a single question did she ask Lois on her return, but she saw that she was very white and her lips were set in a hard line.

The next day passed wretchedly, and on the

following morning Lois came to her, nervous and flushed.

"Aunt," she said, entreatingly, "will you lend me twenty pounds until next quarter-day?"

"Twenty pounds! Why, Lois, what have you done with your allowance? It ought to be ample for a young girl's needs, and it does not seem to me that you have spent nearly so much money of late upon your toilet."

The colour mounted still higher in the girl's cheeks.

"Please let me have the loan, and ask me no questions. Some day, perhaps, I will tell you all. And try, oh! dear auntie, try to believe that I am silent as to my doings because silence is best. Try to feel that in nothing have I disgraced my honourable name."

Without a word Miss Rebecca handed her bank notes to the amount required. She was greatly incensed, and yet, instinctively, she knew that although Lois might have been foolish, she had not been wicked. But she waived her thanks, and refused to receive the kiss the girl would have given her. With a little sigh, her niece turned and left the room.

Just at dusk that evening she dressed for walking, saying "Good-bye" to Miss Rebecca as she passed the open door.

"Going out?" said the old lady. "I fancy Mr. Argyle would hardly approve these clandestine meetings, and should they continue I shall insist upon an explanation, or shall send you away from home. I will not have the Stanford name disgraced, your father's memory outraged. If you will not care for yourself I must care for you. Not here, where you are known, shall your folly be made the subject for vulgar gossip. You know when I begin a thing I carry it through to the end."

White as death was Lois, and her lips quivered a moment, for throughout her life she had been sheltered from harshness, untouched by suspicion; but her dormant strength came quickly to her aid and she said—

"I will bring no disgrace upon you or my dead father. I would die first."

She looked so proud, so pure, standing there in the uncertain light, that Miss Rebecca was fain to cry out. "I believe you," only pride restrained her, and she was cruelly hurt, too, by the girl's reserve. She only said, frigidly,—

"Your actions do not emphasise your words, and I am most unhappy because of you; but experience should have taught me to trust no one."

To this Lois made no reply. She was toying nervously with a refractory button of her glove, and when she found Miss Rebecca made no further speech, she simply said again. "Good-bye," and so went out into the fast gathering dusk.

A few minutes later a visitor was shown in to Miss Rebecca, none other than Harold Argyle. He looked wild and travel-stained, as, thrusting towards her her own written message, he demanded,—

"What does this mean? I have come for an explanation of what is Arabic to me." The note ran thus:

"I did not believe one of my own blood could be so utterly false as Lois has shown herself. She has deceived us both—I can prove it. She is in the habit of meeting some man unknown to me, and of assisting him pecuniarily. She has no needy relatives, and this creature has a certain hold upon her to which I have no clue. It is only in common justice to you that I discover my niece's folly to you before it is too late for you to withdraw from your contract. You see retribution has come to a Harefield from a Stanford after all.—REBECCA STANFORD."

"It is a lie!" Harold cried, fiercely, as the old lady concluded her reading. "It is nothing but a foul conspiracy to part us. Lois is all truth. How dare you so defame the girl you profess to love!"

The handsome, stern old face had a tortured look as she answered,—

"I would rather know myself guilty of slander than Lois of deceit; but what I have written is as true as the Gospel itself, and it is the last bitter drop in the most bitter cup given me to drink. I can even find a little pity in my heart for you, because, after the fashion of the men of your race, you love well—for a while—and you have trusted her. Perhaps you even feel something of the awful despair which Gracie and I suffered long ago—long ago! Go back to your place, boy, and learn forgetfulness of one who cannot give you whole-hearted allegiance."

The white face opposing hers was very dogged. It struck her even in the midst of her pain and scorn that neither of the Harefield brothers had ever worn so resolute a look; that never had their handsome eyes reflected such candour and honesty of purpose.

"I swore to trust Lois in and through all. It maybe I inherit some of my dead mother's loyalty. I will never believe her false until I am convinced by ocular demonstration that she is so."

"Then you shall be convinced," said Miss Rebecca. "You shall have 'ocular' demonstration, if that alone will satisfy you. Lois Stanford has gone even now to meet the man of whom I wrote you, carrying with her, for his assistance, twenty pounds in notes—borrowed of me."

"Tell me where to find them! Heavens! I will not—I cannot yet believe!"

"When you leave the garden, turn to the left, and walk along the road until you come to three poplars, which stand in a straight line with the hedge—that is their meeting-place. See and hear for yourself, and thank Heaven for your enlightenment. I say no more."

So drawn and haggard was his face, that Miss Rebecca repented of the mischief she had wrought; but before she could express any sympathy with his sorrow, or seek to still the storm she had raised, Harold Argyle had gone from her presence.

She saw him rush through the garden, and remembering that the Harefield temper was a fiery one, she rose in greatest alarm, and catching up a wrap in the hall, followed him as quickly as age and infirmity would permit.

And when she had almost reached the poplars she saw Lois coming towards her alone, and caught her breath sharply in her fear.

"Where is Harold Argyle?" she asked, excitedly, clutching at the girl's arm.

"Harold! I have not seen him. Are you dreaming, aunt?" she answered, half afraid Miss Rebecca was insane. "I did not come out to meet him."

"But he followed you here. I sent for him, I told him all the truth. He would not believe you guilty, he must have 'ocular' demonstration; and so I told him where he would be most likely to find you. And—and, Lois!—oh, Lois! you wicked girl! If they meet there will be murder done."

White and still stood Lois a moment. All the life seemed stricken from the lithe young form, all the freshness of youth had vanished from her face, and when at last she spoke her voice was jarred and out of tune.

"You have done a cruel and foolish thing," she said, heavily; "you should have trusted me more than this." Then, with sudden passion, "They must not, they shall not meet! If I can prevent shame or pain resting upon *him*, I do not much care what comes to me. Stay here, or return home as you will, I must follow *him*."

And before Miss Rebecca could stay her she had flown up the road in the direction of the station, and the poor lady, afraid to return without her, remained shivering under the hedge, and wondering if by *him* Lois meant her secret lover, or persecutor.

Breathless with the haste she made, Lois came at last within sight of a figure now hatefully familiar to her, and with an effort she cried "Stop!" Then she waited, for indeed she could go no farther, until the pursued turned and advanced towards her.

"You must get away at once," she cried, agitatedly; "some one has been made acquainted with your movements. And—and it would be dangerous for you two to meet. Go! go! If the money I have given you is insufficient, take these," and hastily stripping herself of bracelets and earrings, she gave them into his greedy hand. He hesitated a moment—she was beside herself with fear. "I have no more to give you. Go; the man who searches for you is my lover—he will have small mercy on you."

And then, like the scoundrel he was, he turned and left her without one word of thanks, being anxious only to save his precious body from richly-merited chastisement.

And Lois stood under the starlit sky, praying that, in some wise, Harold had been kept in happy ignorance of all that had passed.

Oh, vain prayer! already, as he believed, he had learned the worst. He had heard certain words spoken which seemed to set the seal upon his *fiancée's* falsehood, and there had been murder in his heart; for a moment he had been tempted to rush forward and strike his favoured rival to the ground, and then a vast self-scorn possessed him that he should so easily have fallen a dupe to woman's beauty, woman's wiles, and with a muttered oath he turned away; and there was never any danger for the mysterious visitor from that moment.

But as Lois went slowly and heavily homewards, a great fear possessed her that all her glad days were ended.

She looked vainly in all directions for some distant glimpse of Harold's figure, and then, as hope failed her, she murmured brokenly,—

"He has seen us together and believes the worst. Oh, my heart will break! my heart will break! If all is over between us, may death come soon."

Presently she was met by Miss Rebecca, who gasped,—

"Tell me all!"

The girl wrung her hands wildly.

"He—my companion is safe. But, oh, aunt! aunt! what have you done? Oh, my broken life! my broken life! As well as you loved Richard Harefield, I love Harold. I shall go to my grave with his memory fresh in my heart and brain. And if he doubts me, he will leave me; if he leaves me, you have parted us."

Miss Rebecca crept close to her.

"Don't look like that, Lois; I cannot bear it! I did all for the best. And, child! child! as I have trusted you until now, will not you confide in me? I am not angry, only very, very sorrowful. I will forgive any foolish thing you may have done; I cannot believe you wicked—I will rid you of your tormentor—if necessary I will interview him."

"No! no! no!" cried Lois, "I will not allow it! Remember I am my own mistress. And oh! as you love me, as once you had faith in me, try to believe that I am not quite so bad as I seem—one day, perhaps, all will be made plain to you. And now, for my sorrow's sake, be kind to me."

Miss Rebecca drew back a little. She was a proud woman, and she hated mysteries. She was cruelly wounded, too, that this child of her love should allow a stranger to come between them.

"You will act as you please," she said, icily; "I am powerless, and my wishes have no longer any weight with you."

Lois burst into hysterical sobs. Indeed, she was being tried beyond her strength, and the thought that even now Harold was misjudging and condemning her broke down all her pride.

"Let me alone," she said, "just one moment. Presently I shall be my ordinary self again. Oh, auntie! auntie! if only you had been less hasty and more merciful. As it

is, you have wrecked the happiness of my whole life!"

Then as her tearful eyes rested upon Miss Rebecca's troubled face, she forgot her own great grief so far as to put a strong young arm about the trembling figure, and to say, brokenly,—

"Let us go home. You are cold and tired. Lean upon me, I am so strong; and oh! whatever I may do, however dark the clouds may gather between us, try to think I love you still, dearly—ah! more dearly than you can guess, my more than mother!"

"Lois, if only you would not be mysterious! I have had more than enough of mysteries in the course of my life. They never ended well. And this man, did you love him, or fancy you loved him once, before you discovered his unworthiness, or learned to know Harold Argyle? Tell me that at least."

The colour come into the white, beautiful face.

"He never was my lover; but he possesses a secret which it is my interest to purchase."

Miss Rebecca visibly shrank from her; but if Lois suffered any additional pang she made no sign, and in silence they went home together; and secretly Miss Rebecca felt a doubt of her own wisdom, which not for worlds would she confess.

Perhaps, after all, it would have been better to have consented to the girl's betrothal. In a little while she would have been safe under a husband's care, and the Harefields knew how to defend their own, whatever their vices and failings might be.

The next day a letter reached Lois from Harold, and it was terribly cruel.

"Acting upon your aunt's instructions I followed you last night, and saw you meet some unknown person. My first impulse was to rush forward and strike him to the ground, to tell you how bitterly I despise you, and hate myself for being so easily duped. But a moment's reflection showed me that my happiness lay in discovering your falsehood so soon; and I have loved you too well to let slander breathe upon your name. I shall never trust any woman again. You seemed so true, you are so false, and you have amply revenged any wrongs the Stanfords suffered at the Harefields' hands. I wish for no reply; any communication from you will be returned unopened.—HAROLD ARGYLE"

In a passion of pain the girl bowed her head upon her arms, and wept as though her heart would break. It seemed to her life was ended; henceforth she might exist, but nothing more. And how prone those who loved her best had been to misjudge her! Suddenly she started to her feet.

"No, I will not appeal to him. I will not confess the truth," she said. "He so readily believed evil of me; and Cæsar's wife should be above suspicion."

Then she dashed her tears away with angry hands, and having obliterated all traces of them, as far as she could, she rejoined her aunt.

"I may as well tell you at once," she said, her voice all jarred and out of tune. "Mr. Argyle has decided I am not worthy to be his wife; and so we will remain together. I shall never marry now!"

"Lois, are you angry with me? How changed your voice is."

"I am not angry; I am only a broken-hearted woman. But do not fear that I shall make any moan; and from to-night let my story be forgotten, it is better so;" and she laughed contemptuously.

But Miss Rebecca, remembering that just in such a fashion had she received the cruellest blow that had ever fallen upon her, wept silently; and through the days that followed she was doubly kind to this child of her love, and with all her might strove to break down the icy barrier of composure with which Lois seemed environed.

Charity knowing a little, and guessing much, did not spare her mistress and foster-sister.

"I should think you're satisfied at last," she said, tartly. "You've spoiled that child's life, and now she'll go down to her grave a cantankerous old maid, just like you and me will; and if ever there was an honest lad, Mr. Harold is that. We're both old women, and who's to take care of Miss Lois when we're gone puzzles me."

"Charity, you are very impertinent."

"People always are when they speak the truth; but just 'cause your own youth was spoiled, must you go and wreck that child's! Lord! I've seen her growing up, and, bless her innocent heart, I've never known anything but kindness from her, and—and—well, Miss Rebecca, I am ashamed of you!"

"That will do, Charity! Please to leave the room."

"Oh yes, and the house too, I reckon. Well, I'll go at once. I'm too old for work!"

But as this was but a repetition of many a scene, Charity did not leave.

Lois had returned her ring to her lover without a word of entreaty or apology. He had wronged her, and although she had held him so dear, she was of too proud a nature to recall herself to one who could so easily be made to doubt her loyalty. And then, too, Harold had vowed to return any communications from her unopened; that was an indignity to which she would not submit. There was nothing for her but resignation.

Other lovers she had, but to them all she turned a deaf ear, and tried to take up the thread of her life where she had dropped it. And in the vain hope of teaching her forgetfulness Miss Rebecca carried her off to fresh scenes, until she thought that the sting of her grief must surely be less bitter, and with thankful heart turned homewards.

"I shall have her with me always now," she thought, and then she reproached herself for her selfishness; but always she did her best to make her young life bright.

One day they sat together, Lois reading aloud from a little book, the plot of which was laid in Mexico, and so absorbed was she in the story, that she did not heed the change gradually hardening and whitening Miss Rebecca's face and she dropped the book with a clatter as her aunt cried,—

"Take it away! take it away! I hate the very name of Mexico. Never let me hear it again. Let it be forgotten as I have prayed you to forget the Harefields," and then, to the girl's dismay, she burst into tears.

"My dear aunt! my dear aunt!" she said, rising, and putting a loving arm about her, "I did not know! I did not guess—that is, I forgot."

"What did you forget?" interrupted the other, fiercely. "You cannot tell in what way Mexico is connected with my bitter past——"

"How should I know?" evasively. "I was so startled by your unaccountable emotion, I did not stay to choose my words. But I promise I will not transgress again."

But Miss Rebecca was not to be mollified. Gathering up her work she went majestically from the room, ashamed of her own weakness. And with a pitiful look on her beautiful face, Lois hid away her book.

"Strange," she thought, sadly, "how these Harefields should cross our lives to spoil them. There is a fatality in it."

CHAPTER III.

For some time Lois Stanford's health had seemed failing, and always whilst she was away on those long solitary rambles she affected, Miss Rebecca was troubled in her own mind lest she should have made some further assignation with the mysterious stranger. The shame of it was eating into the old lady's heart, and she was for ever casting about in her own mind how to save her darling from woe. At length she remembered an old friend—a very old friend, who was now superior of a small nunnery on the Cornwall coast, where a few gentlemen's daughters were boarded and educated.

She had been a notorious flirt in her youth, and when her beauty began to wane, and her lovers dwindled away, she "took up" with religion, and now there was no more severe and ascetic woman than Henriette Dauvray. To her, in the extremity of her anxiety and pain, Miss Rebecca wrote, stating only that her niece had suffered a terrible disappointment, and required change of air and scene; that it was her desire the girl should remain single, and praying her old friend to admit her into the nunnery as a boarder until she had recovered her health and spirits. For such an act of mercy she would pay liberally. And having despatched her letter, Miss Rebecca waited impatiently for a reply. It came by return of post

The Lady Superior would be glad to receive Miss Stanford into her little fold, but as she was a heretic, and was to share none of the rites and observances of the Holy Church, all fees were to be doubled, and she would be allowed to worship after her own deplorable fashion. For the rest, Mother Henriette promised greatest comfort, strictest watch and ward, for the sake of the old days when she too found pleasure in the world, which unhappily her friend Rebecca had not forsaken even at her advanced age.

Very nervously Miss Rebecca sought her niece, and with much stammering and confusion acquainted her with her little plot. Lois would not help her with one word or look; her face was very white and set, and her eyes had taken into their usually soft depths something of Miss Rebecca's hardness. Her lips were curved in a bitter line, and her hands fast clasped. But when her aunt said, half angrily, half entreatingly,—

"You will believe I am doing this for your good, dear child, and will not refuse to go, knowing that I cannot compel you," she answered, steadily and stonily,—

"I am more than glad to go. I cannot breathe in an atmosphere of mistrust. When do you wish me to start?"

"Lois! Lois! can you believe I would consent to let you go, save for your own good?"

"I do not doubt your kind intentions, and I submit to your wishes."

She was hurt and outraged, and her voice had lost its winning sweetness. She quite disregarded the love in the faded eyes which followed her every movement; and Miss Rebecca, always quick to take offence, at least of late, said, sharply,—

"A little more courtesy would be infinitely more becoming to you, Lois; and as nothing is to be gained by delay, and you profess yourself willing to fall in with my wishes, you may as well start by the eleven train this morning. I will take you part of your journey; Henriette will meet us, and you will go on to Elfdell, with her. Your luggage can follow."

It seemed to Lois she must choke, but young as she was she had all the Stanford courage and presently she said, quietly,—

"I will make my preparations now. I suppose I shall be allowed to correspond with you freely?"

"That of course," Miss Rebecca answered, far more lightly than she felt, and then she summoned Charity to assist in the necessary arrangements. But when the faithful old soul heard the reason for this sudden journey she let her hands fall limp by her sides, as she said, in the old broad and half-forgotten dialect of her youth,—

"Miss, you're mad as a March Hare, nothing more nor less. You must be clean daft to send a bit o' a thing like Miss Lois among them popish people. Do you want her to come back a whinin' saint. And that Henriette too! Don't I remember her with her eyes and her——"

"Charity, you forget yourself! How dare you speak so rudely."

Charity laughed shortly.

"Its time some one spoke out, miss, seeing you're bent on making us all wretched, and turning your own child, as one may call her, over to a lot o' papists. You don't catch me stirring a finger to help you, not if I know it."

"Charity!" Miss Rebecca cried, angrily, "I am I mistress or are you?"

"You're mistress," snorted Charity, "but you don't know how to use your authority, miss. It strikes me a strait-waistcoat——"

"Silence! leave my presence, and you may consider yourself discharged."

"Certainly, miss. Would you like me to go at once? I daresay Miss Lois will engage me. She ain't one to forget faithful service, she ain't."

"You are an insolent and ungrateful woman." Miss Rebecca was almost on the verge of tears. "Now when most I need comfort and support you fail me utterly. I did not expect such treatment from you."

"Then," said Charity, refusing to be touched by the other's emotion, "why don't you let your kind heart have its own way instead of nursing up your pride. Send for Mr. Argyle, and you'll soon see Miss Lois herself again."

"I cannot; and—and Charity, you condemn me unheard. I am sending Lois away because she is not loyal to her lover, and I am afraid that she will yet disgrace our honest home."

Charity looked at her with wide eyes; then she said, *sotto voce*, "She's clean mad, there ain't a morsel of doubt about that," and she stalked from the room, leaving Miss Rebecca very hot and indignant.

An hour later, when all necessary packing was done, her mistress found her seated in the kitchen, her hands idly resting on her lap.

"Did I not tell you to consider yourself discharged?" she questioned, irately.

"Yes; and if you was sane I'd have taken you at your word and gone; but when Miss Lois is away you'll want some one to take care of you, and so here I stop unless you like to put me out by force, and there ain't many in Carlsholme would care to tackle me in that way."

She looked very grim and resolute; and angry as Miss Rebecca was, she could not find it in her heart to quarrel with her faithful old friend and servant, knowing well what a loyal soul she was.

"Come," she said, "you and I cannot afford to disagree at this time of day. Let us shake hands, Charity, and forget our foolish words." Then, as Charity still hung back, being sore for the sake of Lois, she added with a break in her voice, "I am old and broken, the sorrows of my life have been too many for me. My child is estranged from me. Will you, too, close your heart against me?"

Then Charity, bursting into tears, declared vehemently she was the wickedest woman in the world, and deserved to be torn to pieces by wild horses; and having kissed Rebecca's hand, wiped away her tears, and turned away to perform her neglected duties.

But for all her remorse she utterly refused in any way to assist in Miss Stanford's departure.

The girl was very pale and steady as she bade the servants good-bye; not even Charity's tears and caresses stirred her out of her strange calm, and even when she was seated in the railway carriage with her aunt she made neither complaint nor moan. She merely asked,—

"How long am I to remain at Elfdell?"

"Until your health improves, and—and I am quite convinced you have banished that man out of your life. Of course you may leave when you please. I have absolutely no control over you; but at least I have some claim upon your affection and gratitude, and I rely upon your given word."

"I shall not break it," coldly; "I will not leave the convent until I have your permission. I have no inducement to return home, and I could not very well start an establishment of my own."

Very little more was said until they reached a small junction, where they were met by the Superior. The girl's heart sank as she looked into the cold face which retained no impression of its former beauty, and her new guardian's manner was far from reassuring; so icy it was, that even Miss Rebecca felt chilled, and wondered vaguely if this sour-visaged, stiff-mannered woman could indeed be the coquettish, beautiful Henriette she had known in her far-away youth.

She returned home in a most depressed mood, although at the last Lois had kissed her fondly and spoken kindly words.

It was awful to the poor lady to enter the quiet home, to feel that to those pleasant rooms Lois would long be a stranger; and then, too, Charity, who had had time to brood over the girl's wrongs, proved not only a dolorous but very unsympathetic companion.

Poor Miss Rebecca! She had done all for the best, as she fondly believed, but the day was not far distant when her wisdom would show as madness, and every suspicion she had nursed of her niece rise up to torture her heart and memory alike.

Meanwhile Lois lived her new life, and was not wholly unhappy despite the restrictions placed upon her.

She was allowed free access to the boarders on condition that she did not tamper with their religious belief. She wandered about the convent gardens at will, walked daily, a tall graceful figure, with her companions, under the charge of the two oldest and sourest sisters; and, by special request from Miss Rebecca, was allowed to row every morning to an islet about a mile distant in company with an old man who was fisherman, guide to tourists, and "odd job man" to the convent.

Health returned to her, but the life was insufferably dull. She was not allowed to purchase or read novels, and no music save of a sacred character was permitted within the convent walls; but she wrote long and loving letters to Miss Rebecca, for Lois had a heart of gold, and could not cherish malice.

She acknowledged even to herself that appearances were against her, and her aunt was fully justified in her belief, and in the strange course she had taken.

Two months went by, and daily Charity wearied her mistress to send for Lois home, but, as yet, the lady showed no sign of relenting; and the old servant was sinking into a state of sulky rebellion.

It was a clear night, and she had been to post some letters, when, as she hurried homewards, she heard her name spoken in a voice which somehow sounded familiar, and veering quickly round, she said,—

"Yes, Charity's my name, but if it's charity you want, you'd better go elsewhere, my man."

"You are as complimentary and softly-spoken as ever, my pink of maids," laughed the voice; "but I am not asking charity. I come here for my due only. Look at me and tell me if you know me."

Peering at him with her near-sighted eyes, the old woman saw, with a dreadful shock, the face of one she had long believed dead.

"You!" she cried, shrilly, "you——"

But when she would have spoken his name he clapped a slender hand over her mouth, so staying her words.

"Keep quiet," he said, "I don't want to hurt you. I am here for no harm, but I must and will see your young mistress. I have waited about this place two days in the hope of meeting her."

"Why don't you come up to the house like an honest man?" demanded Charity, freeing herself from him. "But, I reckon, you've been so long a rogue you could not act straight if you tried. Oh, I took your measure years ago."

"You are pleased to be facetious," he retorted, lightly. "What a happy man your husband should be, possessing so much humour and amiability in his wife."

"Husband!" snapped Charity; "I never was fool enough to have one. You and your precious brother showed me what kind o' cattle men are. Now just you say what you want with Miss Lois, and if I see fit I'll give her your message; if I don't——"

"Why, I shall come up to the house, 'like an honest man;' but being tender-hearted, I would wish to spare your mistress pain. There is little good in raking up the ashes of the past."

"True, when the past is anything to do with you. Now for your message."

"I want money—it is my normal state; for many reasons which I have explained to Miss Lois, she has consented to allow me certain sums from time to time. She is very anxious that her aunt should not so much as learn the fact of my resuscitation; but if her supplies fail me, I have no alternative but to turn mendicant to Miss Rebecca Stanford."

There was something so indescribably mean and wicked in his face and voice as he gave utterance to his last words, that Charity recoiled from him; but she would not have been Charity if she had refrained from a sharp retort. She even snapped her fingers at him as she said,—

"You'd better try the begging line while I'm in the house! I'm old, but I'm strong yet, worth fifty of such men as you, who've always gone the pace. And Miss Rebecca ain't young and easy deceived now. She'd as soon look you up as not, so don't you try any big words with her."

He smiled in a superior fashion.

"You are a very foolish woman, and will only bring misery to your mistress if you maintain your present attitude. I tell you I hold a secret which gives me unlimited power over her, and unless Miss Lois helps me I shall use it to her aunt's undoing."

Charity gasped. She thought she had known every secret of her foster-sister's life; but this could not be, for the man spoke in a tone which carried conviction with it. Was shame to fall on that dear grey head, when Lois, always generous, always kind, was willing to avert the blow and bear unmerited blame? In a moment her resolution was taken.

"Miss Lois has been sent away because of you. And, oh! you villain! 'tis you that's cost her her sweetheart. Oh lor! how wide Miss Rebecca is of the mark! But you shan't trouble my mistress—the young one will know how to deal with you; she's got a spirit, and she must hate you! So you can't work much on her pity. I'll give you her address; you can write or go to her at the Convent Elfdell."

"But, kindest and best of women, I can't go without money. I am really ashamed to say I have not sufficient to pay for bed and board to-night."

"Stop here; I'll come again soon and bring you enough to pay your way down to Elfdell. I'll give it you, 'cause there ain't any chance of you remembering to pay it back—gentleman-born though you are."

If she expected him to wince under her words she was doomed to disappointment; he only smiled airily, kissed his hand gallantly, and waited in a satisfied state of mind for her return.

"I've brought two pounds," she said, thrusting the money into his palm, "that ought to be enough for present use; and I shall write Miss Lois myself to-night."

"No necessity, my benevolent angel. I shall reach Elfdell before your letter. Can I carry any message for you? I shall be happy to execute any commission with which you may entrust me——"

"Trust you! Lor! I'd as likely trust Satan," and she turned contemptuously away, hearing, as she went, the sound of a low sardonic chuckle.

In a very unhappy frame of mind she went about her little duties, wondering what power this man held over her beloved mistress, and why Lois would not speak to clear herself.

either to Miss Rebecca or her lover. And then she said in a half sullen way,—

"I see a road out of it all. If both are to be made miserable 'cause of that wretch, well, I'll up and tell him about Mr. Argyle, and then he'll go to him and everything'll come out."

"Everything." That word made her pause. What might it mean to Miss Rebecca? What was it she was at such pains to hide, that not even her foster-sister had a hint of the truth? Whatever came, her sad life must not be further saddened, and with that thought Charity held on her way waiting for news of Lois.

The next morning was bright and sunny, and Lois Stanford walked with the boarders through the quiet lanes surrounding the convent. She was talking animatedly to her companion of some pictures she had seen, when suddenly her voice faltered, then died utterly out.

The girl, looking up at her, saw her face had grown white, and her eyes had a strained expression; but when she asked, "Are you ill?" Lois answered steadily,—

"No—that is, I had a momentary pain at my heart; but it is gone now," and as she spoke a man passed closely by her.

He had the appearance of a gentleman down at heels, and as he brushed by her he thrust a slip of paper into her hand. One of the lynx-eyed nuns saw this; but not a word did she say to Lois; only when she found audience with the Superior did she utter one word about the transaction.

Beautiful and kind as the girl was, she hated her, for hatred is not confined to the breast of the so-called pagan, and the most immaculate women are usually the hardest judges, the bitterest foes, and the most disagreeable creatures with whom to live; so straight went Sister Hannah to the Abbess, and lodged her complaint with unction beautiful to hear.

Then the Abbess rose in her wrath. She considered herself ill-treated by her whilom friend, most grossly deceived by Lois, and not another hour more than was absolutely necessary should the heretic remain in the sacred precincts of the convent. She summoned the girl to her presence, and, repeating sister Hannah's story, asked what she had to say in self-defence.

"Nothing," answered Lois, quietly; "all that the sister has told you is true, but I have done no wrong."

The calmness of innocence was condemned as the insolent assurance of guilt, and the Abbess was by no means inclined to mercy. After a sharp and somewhat coarse speech she bade her go at once to her room and to remain there until the time for her departure came. Then she wrote to Miss Rebecca reproaching her in no measured terms for sending such an ill-disciplined girl into her own little fold, and telling her that Lois would leave the convent under the care of a sister, who would convey her as far as the junction, after which the Abbess must beg to wash her hands of her. Up in her room Lois read the written message. It was, as usual, a request for money, and as she read it the girl's lips were set in a hard line, and her eyes were dusky with anger.

"I will fight him with other weapons now," she said. "He has goaded me beyond endurance, and so long as I give, he will cry 'More! more!' I will not ruin myself to satisfy his vices," and having reached that conclusion she felt more composed.

She slept well through the night, and rose refreshed long before the sister who brought in her frugal breakfast appeared. The meal being ended, she was again summoned into the Superior's presence.

"You may prepare at once for your journey," she said. "By this time my letter will have reached Miss Stanford, who will doubtless meet you on your way. For the rest I may say I deeply regret having admitted you to the privileges of the convent, and only fervently pray that you have left the minds and souls of my charges unsullied as you found them."

There was no hint of fear or shame on the proud, erect face as Lois responded,—

"Had you asked for an explanation concerning yesterday's event, I would have satisfied you as far as I was able, but you preferred to see my conduct in the worst light, and to condemn me unheard. I can only hope that such utter lack of justice and charity is not common to your faith;" and then she went out, leaving the Abbess speechless with anger and outraged dignity.

Never before had any one under her authority dared to address her in such a manner, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the tall slight figure issue from the convent gates in company with Sister Hannah. Upon the roadway they met Miss Stanford's *bête noir*. He was evidently waiting her; so she turned swiftly to the nun, with the words,—

"Wait here, or walk on, as you please. I have something to say to this—this gentleman," and she crossed at once to him.

"You have brought me help?" he said, eagerly, seen in the full glare of the sun he was by no means a young man. "I hoped you would come early——"

"I have brought you nothing," she retorted icily. "I never intend to submit to your extortions again. You have made misery for me, you have sown distrust of me in my aunt's mind, robbed me of my lover, and disgraced me here. You may do your worst. I never had any fear for myself, and I shall know soon how best to guard her."

"I am desperate," he answered, harshly, "and desperate men do not stick at trifles; what I threatened to do I shall do, and that quickly."

"Very well; forewarned is forearmed," and she left him with a disdainful gesture; under his breath he made use of a very strong expression adding,—

"By Heaven, my lady, I'll make you repent your very cavalier treatment; I reckon you'll be sorry enough when I do make my identity known—and if I remember Rebecca as she was, she will not send me away. I'll be in Carlsholme as soon as Mistress Lois."

Arrived at the station the girl quietly took one first class ticket; when Sister Hannah mentioned what she believed to be an oversight, Lois said, quietly,—

"I am travelling alone; we part here."

"My orders are to go with you to the junction; I dare not disobey them."

"And I utterly refuse to allow you to accompany me," she answered, icily.

"Then I must travel in a separate compartment; the Abbess is not to be defied."

A flush spread over the paleness of Miss Stanford's face.

"I am not a minor," she said, still in those quiet, scornful tones, "I am absolutely free from control, and if you presume to persecute me, I shall take what redress the law will give. I have been insulted and maliciously treated through your agency, and I will not submit to your surveillance. Go!"

Sister Hannah stood looking a moment at her, irresolution in her cunning eyes,—

"If I leave you, how am I to know that you will return home? For anything I know to the contrary you may be on the point of eloping."

Lois smiled disdainfully.

"You may rest assured I shall not disgrace my name. If the Abbess is very angry, you may lay all blame upon my shoulders," and then stepping into the carriage she looked out a moment to add, "Remember, if you follow me, it is at your own cost," and there was something in her expression which compelled the sister to leave her; not, however, before she had seen the mysterious stranger enter a third-class carriage a little below the one which now sheltered Miss Stanford. And, of course, when her last escapade was related to Henriette Dauvray, she believed the very worst of her; only, for the good name of the convent, she forbade that the story should be circulated even amongst her satellites.

It struck coldly upon Miss Stanford's heart that no one met her at the station.—

"I suppose," she thought, sadly, "aunt prefers my absence now, and intends to convey this to me as delicately as she can. Well, if it is so, I must go away again; but oh! it is hard to be so misjudged."

She left her luggage at the primitive station, and walked towards the old home; and despite the fear of coldness from Miss Rebecca, she felt a keen, exquisite joy in once more treading the old familiar way, and marking the old familiar objects.

From the porch Charity saw her coming, and with almost incredible speed for one so old, ran out to meet her, flinging welcoming arms around her, sobbing out foolish words of endearment, and kissing her often, much as a mother might a long-lost child.

"Oh, and it's glad I am to welcome you back, Miss Lois," she said, when she was a little composed, "the house has been that horrid without you as never was; and Miss Rebecca has grown that peevish there ain't any bearing her."

"Is she very angry because I have returned?" asked Lois, anxiously.

"Not 'cause you've come home, but 'cause of the way you've come; but she's written a real smart letter back to that Madame Dauvray, she never was any good, like her frog-eating father before her, she ain't one to foul her own nest. But she's as mad as she can be to think you are deceiving her, and at first she said she wouldn't see you at all."

Lois sighed, and that faint sound of grief stirred Charity's loyal heart to keenest pity.

"There, don't you worry and fret, dearie; it'll all come right soon; if not, why I'll tell Miss Rebecca the truth, and how all along you've been shielding her from trouble, and she won't know how to make up to you for her ill thoughts of you."

"Charity, you know something. I wonder how much?"

"I know who that man is you've been meeting; and I shall find a way to settle him yet. He ain't got no manner of claim upon my mistress."

Lois was unfeignedly relieved to find how little Charity was acquainted with the story she was always striving to hide, and said, blithely,—

"Let us go in, dear old friend. We must not seem to be conspirators if we mean to help each other and her."

So they entered the house, and Miss Rebecca met her darling with coldness which almost broke her own poor weary heart.

"You have returned to me in disgrace," she said, heavily. "I wish the fact of your deceit had killed me, then I should be at rest. Now I ask you, in pity for my pain, to let me see you but little for a few days, until I have grown accustomed to the sense of your presence here, and learned in a measure to forget your folly!"

So that evening Lois dined alone, Charity attending her. Suddenly the old woman dropped a plate with a clatter upon the table.

"He's there, miss, sure as death. I'd know his sneaking back amongst a thousand. There, sit still; you shan't go out to him just to make the mistress angrier. She can't think he's my sweetheart, anyhow," with a grim laugh, and stepping through the open French window, she went quickly towards the shrubbery, coming suddenly upon a man, whom she addressed coolly as,—

"You there? Wait a minute, I've got a word to say to you, you rascal!"

"Ah! my gracious Charity!"

"Stop that nonsense, and listen to me. It ain't a morsel of good coming here; the young mistress is tired to death of you, and the old one ain't got much to give," mendaciously, "she's fooled her money away. If you'll only leave her in peace, I'll put you up to a good thing."

"What is it?" eagerly. "I'll act squarely by you, I swear I will."

"Oh, don't trouble to swear about it, your oath aint very binding; but why don't you go to your own, who can help you? You need not laugh;" and then she whispered a few words in his ear.

When he turned away he set his face towards London; but she would tell nothing of what she had done to Lois.

CHAPTER III.

HAROLD ARGYLE was leaving his club. He looked haggard and worn, very unlike the young fellow who a few months since had gone so hopefully to beg Lois Stanford's hand of her guardian.

Men who knew him intimately wondered over the change in him, and regretted it, for he was a favourite in society; but if he had suffered any great ill, he was not one to talk of it; and he had a certain way of repelling curiosity.

Now, as he came down the steps, he was wondering, wearily, what the end of the coil would be; and he started when an unfamiliar voice spoke his name.

"Mr. Argyle, I believe?"

Turning quickly, he saw at his elbow a man whose face did not seem strange to him, although at first he was puzzled to think where he had seen it, or its likeness.

"Yes, I am Harold Argyle. What do you want with me?" he said.

"Just a word in private. I have something of interest to disclose. Is there any quiet place close by where we could go?"

"My rooms are near. We could go there," Harold answered, not without reluctance.

He had all the typical Englishman's aversion to chance acquaintances, and somehow this man did not impress him favourably.

His manner was theatrical, his face—handsome still, despite the fact that he was very near to sixty—did not look honest, and both his hair and moustache were dyed.

He caught eagerly at the young man's suggestion; but in reply to his remark,—

"You will surely return the compliment, and give me your name," he said, airily,—

"Wait until we are safely housed. I have a surprise in store for you," and silently they proceeded to Harold's rooms. There the stranger, with a melodramatic gesture, cried, "My boy! my dear boy! do not you recognise your father's features in mine? Give me your hand, nephew. I am the long lost Richard Harefield!"

"You!" said Harold, forgetting to extend so much as a finger in welcome. "This is nonsense! Richard Harefield died many years ago, to the relief of his relatives!"

"He is alive and before you now," the other answered, passing over Harold's final words with surprising airiness and good humour. "Sit down, my boy, and let me make a clean breast of my doings. I haven't behaved well, I know, and I am sorry for it, a man can't do more than repent; but before I begin my story give me wine."

Harold handed him some Chartreuse, and, having satisfied his craving, Mr. Richard Harefield did "a tale unfold."

"I am afraid to say how many years ago it is since Rebecca Stanford and I became affianced lovers. She was a handsome girl with a high spirit, and, of course, I admired her greatly; but I may as well confess her fortune was more to me than all her other charms. We Harefields were an extravagant lot, and it was necessary I should marry money. Old Stanford objected to the engagement, and was positively furious when your father declared a preference for pretty milk-and-water Grace. I believe he honestly loved her—but men are given to changing. There, I have nothing more to say about him—this story is mine and Rebecca's. Despite the opposition of her people she would neither be coerced nor persuaded into breaking her engagement; and so matters stood when something occurred which made it necessary for me to leave England for a time. But hoping soon to return, I felt disinclined to risk the loss of Rebecca's fortune; so before the news of my trouble could reach her I induced her to marry me secretly."

"Marry you?" cried Harold, disgust in eye and voice. "Do you mean that unhappy lady is your wife?"

His uncle's callous recital roused his hottest indignation.

"Yes, that is the case, although she has never borne my name; but she holds the certificate of our marriage, and I can prove it easily. Well, with the funds my bride supplied I went off to America, and for a few months we corresponded regularly and in most affectionate terms; and I must do Rebecca the justice to say that with regard to money matters she was most generous. I often think I should have been wiser to have remained with her. After awhile I fell on with some jolly fellows, and we went together to Mexico, where I did exceedingly well, and the fact is I hated to remember I was not a free man. So I wrote to my wife, telling her frankly our marriage had been a mistake, but as no one save ourselves was cognizant of it, it would be wiser to forget it altogether; that I felt convinced we should be wretched life-companions, and that I would never trouble her again."

"You scoundrel!" Harold broke out. "There is small wonder that she regards the Harefields with hatred and scorn."

"Oh, well! women like Rebecca always cut up rough. They hate to feel they are not necessary to their lovers or husbands. And a very bitter letter she wrote me, too, despite my generosity in leaving her unfettered. She told me she would never see me again; that if I lay starving in the gutter, and a crust given by her hand would save me, she would withhold it. I thanked my lucky stars that I was free of such a firebrand, and when a report of my death was circulated I did not trouble to contradict it. I was fortunate in all that I undertook until three years ago, and then luck went dead against me, and I was at my wits' end what to do. I would have come home then, but I had not the necessary funds, and I could not borrow of any man I knew.

"But at last I struck a good thing, and," with a sly look at his nephew, "being remorseful for the past, longing to end my days in my own land, I returned and went at once to Carlsholme. I had not a penny in my possession, and I intended casting myself on Rebecca's generosity; besides, you see, a man may enter any house which shelters his wife, and now I've come to the gist of my story. I had reached the garden gate when I was confronted by a tall girl with fair hair. 'What do you want?' she said, frigidly. Then I told her my name and in what relation I stood to Rebecca. I thought she would have fainted; but all in a moment she recovered herself, and flashing on me like fury, vowed I should not approach my wife. 'If it is money you want,' she said, 'take all I have. I will give you more to-morrow; but you shall not wake to new life the pain and shame you gave my aunt to bear. I will kill you first!'"

Harold drew a deep breath. There was small wonder Miss Rebecca had been so bitter against him—and oh! what cruel wrong they had done Lois.

"Go on," he said, hoarsely, "let me hear the end of your unsavoury story."

And nothing abashed Mr. Harefield continued,—

"Well, this girl—she is Lawrence Stanford's daughter—kept her promise. But, my dear boy, money always did slip through my fingers, and in a little while I was compelled to apply to her again. She then gave me twenty pounds in notes, but she refused any further help, and dared me to accost her again or make known my existence to her aunt. By Jove, Harold, she was magnificent in her rage, although it was directed against your humble servant, and I determined if possible not to offend her further, only you see need's must. Then by chance I heard of you, and that you were prosperous, and I thought for your father's sake you would help me."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the young man, in a very unpromising voice.

"I thought out of your plenty you would spare me a sufficient sum to keep body and soul together; and I must say I am disappointed in the welcome you accord your sole remaining relative."

"Sir, you are a disgrace to me, and to all connected with you," Harold cried, hotly. "If you showed any genuine remorse I might perhaps forgive you the wrong you have done me as well as others, but you are callous. Still, because you are my father's brother, and an old man I will not refuse the help you ask. I will allow you two hundred yearly, to be paid quarterly by Scruby and Pennell, my solicitors."

"It's a beggarly allowance," retorted Mr. Harefield. "What is a man who has been accustomed to live like a prince to do with fifty pounds a quarter?"

Harold was silent a moment. From his heart he loathed this new-found relative, and he was not likely to forget that he had come between Lois and himself, and probably ruined all his happiness, that thought would not leave him, for, you see, the best of men are selfish. Presently he said,—

"I will make it three hundred if you keep to my conditions. You are not to attempt to molest Miss Rebecca Stanford or her niece again, and on no account are you to visit me. You shall not want; but, on the other hand, I will hold no fellowship with you."

"Hand over the first instalment if you please," said Mr. Harefield, airily, "and I'll agree to any condition you choose to make. Only if you fail to keep your part of the bargain I shall go to Rebecca at once."

"My word is my bond although I am a Harefield. Here is the cash, take it and go. When you have found a suitable residence you will kindly forward your address to Scruby and Pennell."

Mr. Harefield, greedily clutching at the shining coins, said, with a scoffing laugh,—

"Young man, you must have inherited your Quaker notions from your mother. They certainly did not come from our side of the family, and do not find favour with me. You may rest assured I shall not disturb your chaste solitude, your society is not exhilarating. For your little gift thanks, and good-night;" and he passed out whistling "The harp in the air."

Left alone, Harold thought bitterly of all that had passed, and wondered if ever Lois could forgive his harsh judgment, if ever again he dared seek her, kindle the old flame of love into new fire. Then he took his resolve.

On the following morning he travelled down to Carlsholme bent upon repairing his error, and, fear and hope fighting within him, made his way towards Miss Rebecca's house; and there, by the poplars, he saw Lois coming.

She was walking slowly and with downbent head, but hearing steps approaching, looked up, grew white and faint, turned to fly, only her strength failed her; and in another moment Harold was beside her.

"Lois, do not go! I must speak to you. I have been a fool and a brute. Last night, dear, I learned all the truth. I know how much I have wronged you, how cruelly Miss Rebecca has suffered. I have seen Richard Harefield."

She tried to speak but failed, she seemed about to faint; and what more natural than he should place a strong arm about her to support her.

"Can you forgive me? Can you forgive?" he said, remorsefully. "My darling heart,

have I sinned beyond hope of pardon? It was Miss Rebecca who apprised me of these secret meetings. I came, I saw you in his company—I heard certain words he said, and I believed you false, and I wrote you brutally. My life has been a purgatory since then. I do not know what to say to you."

She faced him then with a smile, although her eyes were suffused with tears.

"Say nothing more, dear Harold; let all be forgiven and forgotten, all save our mutual love. I hardly wonder that you doubted me, only you might have been more explicit."

They were alone on the quiet road. Her beautiful face was so temptingly near, he stooped and kissed her mouth.

"I will never distrust you again, however dark the evidence against you may seem. I love you, I love you, queen of my heart! And you will not hold me less dear because I am that man's kith and kin?"

"Can you ask that? His faults are not yours! Oh, poor Aunt Rebecca, you will be patient with her now. You will not be angry if she treats you harshly."

"Never; she will learn to like me a little some day."

"And one thing more, Harold; you will not tell her that dreadful man still lives? She has so long believed him dead, and it would be terrible to her to rake up the ashes of the past."

"I will be guided by you, the best and most generous of women, and in this I shall feel I am making you some slight reparation; but how do you suppose Aunt Rebecca, she belongs to me too, will receive your news?"

"I cannot guess, but I shall know soon; let us go to her at once."

What a radiant, lovely Lois it was that entered the room, her lover in her wake! The old lady looked up amazed, so great was the change in her darling, but she frowned as she saw Harold Argyle.

"You have returned," she said, frigidly, "in this one thing you are no true Harefield; it is their character to love and ride away! What do you want?"

Then he went to her, took possession of the hand she would not give.

"You and I have been wrong," he said, ever so gently and gravely; "all that seemed treacherous in Lois has been explained away. I know her now as the sweetest, dearest, bravest girl on earth. Some day, perhaps, she will tell you more—not now—she is not one to boast of her goodness. And now, because we honour you, and I wish that you would learn to regard me with affection, I ask you to give your sanction to our marriage."

Just such a winning tongue had Richard Harefield, and a hot retort rose to the poor lady's lips; but when she looked into the eager face, so much less handsome than his father's, or Richard's—so infinitely more honest and resolute, she trembled, and with a little, tearless sob, said,—

"I cannot keep her longer, but as you deal by her, may Heaven reward or punish you. Lois, my Lois, it was my wish to keep you always with me—but fate is against me. If you must marry, marry now, and Heaven forbid that ever you should learn the utter cruelty and selfishness of man."

Lois went to her and kissed her, and the young man, bending over her, said,—

"Lois belongs to you, and you must grow to regard me too as your property. Do you suppose I can ever forget your goodness to my promised wife, Aunt Rebecca?"

She was a little startled at that; but it was a pleasant thing to have this young fellow talking and acting in so kindly a strain.

"The world has not spoiled you," she said. "I am willing to try you, but I shall be a lonely old woman indeed when my child has gone."

"We are not going to leave you; Lois is an ignorant young woman, and I shall need some one to keep me in check. Your home shall be with us," and then this audacious young man kissed her faded cheek.

"You have the Harefield impertinence," the lady remarked in quite a pleasant voice, "and, if you please, when is my child's slavery to begin?"

Lois laughed out blithely.

"Do I look like a Griselda?" she asked.

"Not now; you may do so after six months of marriage," grimly.

And yet before Harold left the house that day the date of the wedding was fixed, and it was arranged that Miss Rebecca's home should be in the old house until Harold had had time to select and secure a more commodious residence, when she was to reside with her "young people." On the day previous to the marriage, the old lady went to the girl's room carrying with her a string of pearls.

"They are valuable," she said, "and I planned once to wear them to my own wedding but—but you see the chance never occurred. May they bring you more luck than ever they have brought me—no, don't thank me! Their associations are too sad; but Heaven bless and keep you, dear, and in your new and happy love do not quite forget the old."

Lois laid her arms about her neck and kissed her gently, thinking all the while that had such grief fallen to her as had darkened Miss Rebecca's life she would have died of it.

The next morning all Carlsholme was agog, and people said never had there been a fairer bride than Lois Stanford, never a prouder bridegroom than Harold Argyle, and "Miss Rebecca" was the only one who shed tears over the ceremony or had forebodings. She had suffered too bitterly to pin her faith again to any man.

CHAPTER IV.

In the course of three months Harold and his wife were settled in their new home, which lay in the very heart of Kent, and Miss Rebecca was with them.

She could not but acknowledge that the young man did all in his power to promote his bride's happiness, and that Lois was living in an atmosphere of love and gladness; but, as she remarked to Charity,—

"It is early in the day yet; men soon weary of their wives."

And Charity replied, with a contemptuous sniff, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Miss Rebecca; and, asking your pardon, neither you nor me ought to say much about husbands;" and Miss Rebecca was silent.

Through all these years she had hugged her secret close, she would not part with it now; let it go down with her to the grave. "But, oh!" she thought, "if only I had been less strong to bear my trouble, how much happier for me. Grace so soon got her release."

When one is happy, hours and days fly all too fast, and it seemed at times impossible to Lois that she had been a wife fifteen months. It almost required the presence of her little one to assure her of the fact—for a child had been born to her.

Lois would have named her Rebecca in loving remembrance of her aunt's tender care; but the old lady negatived the suggestion in a most imperative way.

"It is an ugly name with an ugly meaning, and it never brought me any good fortune. Let her be called Hyacinth;" and Hyacinth she accordingly became.

Of Richard Harefield Harold knew little or nothing, and he was content that it should be so; but one day he received a letter from Scruby and Pennell, containing an enclosure from his uncle. It was written in a shaky hand, and the words were few:—

"I am dying. Ask Rebecca to come to me. I cannot go without her forgiveness. I understand too well now what a guilty, heartless wretch I have been.

"Richard Harefield."

The solicitors wrote that Harefield's approaching death was due to a street accident, and that on learning there was not the remotest chance of recovery he had sent to them begging they would at once forward the enclosure, of the contents of which they were ignorant, it being placed in their hands sealed.

With a very troubled look Harold went in search of his wife. She and Charity were engaged playing with the child, but Lois rose at once from her knees, impressed by his manner.

"You want me, dear?"

"Yes; get a hat and come with me into the garden. I have something of importance to tell you."

"Well," she said, as they paced the gravel walk in silence,

"Lois, I have heard from my uncle. Read for yourself."

She obeyed; then lifting her startled eyes to his, said—

"Oh, Harold! how can he—how dare he ask pardon of one he has so deeply injured? She must not know."

"She is his wife, dear. I do not think we have any right to withhold our knowledge from her longer. This, too, is the prayer of a dying man. It is not like you to be harsh."

She stood silent a moment. Then she said, slowly and coldly,—

"He deserves no pity; but perhaps you are right. What is it you wish me to do?"

"I want you to break the news to her as gently as you can."

"Oh, Harold! what a hard task you have set me! It will kill her."

"I think not; and I believe you will do it better than I. Get it over at once. I do not think there is any time for delay."

She lifted her face and kissed him, saying,—

"You are more generous than I;" and then with a fast-beating heart she went to her aunt's sunny room. Leaning over her with a fond arm about her shoulders, she said,—

"Aunt, I have been hearing a very sorrowful story. It is not ended yet. I want you to listen and guide me to a just decision. Will you hear me now?"

"Yes," said Miss Rebecca; "but why do you tremble in this fashion? It is a foolish plan, child, to make the griefs of others your own."

"Perhaps; but in this case it is unavoidable. Years and years ago, dear, there were two sisters, who eventually became the affianced brides of two brothers, the younger of whom jilted the girl he had once held most precious. She died of a broken heart. The elder sister's fate was far, far harder."

"Go on," said Miss Rebecca, in a strange voice, "it is Grace's story and mine you are telling. Why was my fate worse than hers?"

"Because, aunt, Oh my dear aunt, it was your own husband who deserted you."

"Who told you that?" the old lady demanded. She was white and trembling. "Who has given my wretched story into your possession?"

"Both Harold and I have known it for very long; but feeling how painful any mention of it would be, we kept silence. And now, aunt, brace yourself to meet the worst. You heard that Richard Harefield died in Mexico many years back. That was not true, although he never troubled to contradict the rumour. Oh, Harold, come! she will die!"

But by a mighty effort of will the poor lady roused herself.

"No, no! it was only a sudden faintness. Tell me all, Lois. I can bear it. Is he—is this man, my husband, still alive?"

"Yes, aunt; but near now, in truth, to death's door."

"Ah!" she caught her breath sharply, and her age seemed suddenly increased by a score of years. "Oh, Richard! Richard! how happy we might have been! Who has seen him? Is he here?"

"No, he is lying ill somewhere in Holborn, and he prays you to go to him. He says he cannot die without your pardon. What will you do?"

(*Continued on page* 213)

PRETTY PENELOPE.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALTHOUGH Marcia Latimar was now regarded as something more than convalescent, she was by no means restored to her former health and strength, and both Dr. Westall who attended her, and all the Court household, at Denis's express wish and her husband, together with her mother, were concerned at the weakness which still hung about her.

A journey south had of course been recommended by Dr. Westall; but nothing would induce Marcia to listen to this plan.

"I am all right," she said, over and over again to Denis when he urged her to let him make arrangements for a speedy departure. "I hate the Riviera, and I am getting better every day. I shall certainly not go abroad this winter at all events."

"But," Denis would begin, and then stop abruptly; for when Marcia flashed that sharp look at him from under her heavy eyelids, and pinched in her pale lips, he knew he might as well have tried to move a rock from its base as persuade her against some sullen, and to him, incomprehensible reason, that had formed itself in her mind.

To Dr. Westall, when he spoke of the necessity of this change, Marcia was only a little more rude than usual. She hated Dr. Westall, and in return she received a full measure of dislike and contempt from Penelope's old friend, mingling with these feelings in Dr. Westall's mind, however, there was some pity, too—the sort of pity one bestows on some hapless creature whose senses are distorted, and whose mental structure is all wrong.

Dr. Westall was one of the few who knew the real absolute truth about the Latimar household. The gossip that was spread about was more or less unreliable, and naturally there was not wanting the usual amount of exaggeration; but Dr. Westall knew all, and perhaps more. Many and many a time the old doctor would ponder on the miserable mistake Denis had made as he rode home through the village that was never the same thing to him now that gentle Marian Desborough was gone, and Penelope's beauty was not there to laugh a greeting at him from the old garden gate.

Marcia's condition mentally and bodily was a matter of considerable thought, and not a little trouble to Dr. Westall. Symptoms had shown themselves during the past weeks which were ominous to the keen-eyed medical man as far as the future of the Latimars was concerned. Happiness he felt rather than knew Denis Latimar had ceased to expect in his married life; but he might and did reasonably hope for a certain amount of peace as the years rolled on. Now it was just this peace that Dr. Westall felt convinced she more he saw of Marcia that her husband could never hope to obtain. He had watched and analysed as it were Marcia's nature, and the more he examined into her mental constitution the more he was distressed and grieved.

The moods of wild passion and unreasoning jealousy which were so tedious and irritating to Denis and so incomprehensible to Mrs. Rochdale were pretty clear to Dr. Westall. He had seen Marcia often in one of these fits of rage, and the sight had sent him away more troubled and more thoughtful.

However, he kept his thoughts to himself, for a time at least, and he determined he would do so till future events should decide whether his mental diagnosis of Marcia's case was correct or not. He made a final attempt to persuade Marcia to do what was wise.

"I am very sorry you have given up all idea of going abroad, Mrs. Latimar," he said as he was calling one very bitter February day when the earth seemed nipped and shrunken by the force of the icy east wind that howled and shrieked through the leafless trees, "you really require a thorough change."

Marcia lying back listlessly in her chair by the fire, only shrugged her shoulders. She was very thin and very pale, but she would have been handsome still had her eyes not been full of such restless expression, and her lips pinched and drawn as the lips of one who is oppressed night and day by some ceaseless trouble and care. It was the face of a most unhappy woman, and yet Dr. Westall could not help glancing about him at the exquisite appointments and luxury of the room, at the gown Marcia wore, trimmed about the throat with almost priceless lace, the diamonds flashing on her thin restless hands, that must have cost some enormous sum.

The old doctor's broad mind and good nature, and good heart was stirred within him by the sight of the young woman's face that should have been so bright, so full of all the pleasure and sunshine of youth instead of wearing such a look as was never absent from her night or day.

Dr. Westall was a man of quick action. "Mrs. Latimar" he said speaking out in his sharp abrupt fashion, "you are doing very wrong. You know as well as I do that this journey I have been prescribing all this time is the one thing that can do you the good you need to set you up with all your old vigour and strength. Doctors are privileged persons you know. Now will you be very frank with me, and tell me what earthly reason you have for desiring to cut your own throat in this most obstinate fashion?"

Marcia lifted her eyes and looked at him, "Because I choose," she answered curtly.

She was invariably rude to Dr. Westall. She knew of his affections for Penelope. That in itself would have been enough to turn her against him, but apart from this fact, Marcia felt that Dr. Westall regarded her with the most supreme contempt, that he only came to see her because of his friendship with Denis, and she, consequently, decided in her own violent fashion that she hated this old doctor with his straightforward speech and his keen eyes.

"A very good reason, no doubt, as far as you are concerned," Dr. Westall said, gravely; "but scarcely a sufficient one to satisfy me or your husband."

"It is the only one you will get, nevertheless, so you had better make it do," returned Marcia, with a faint, disagreeable smile, and she set her lips more firmly.

She had her own translation, of course, for the real anxiety and desire Denis expressed for this trip south.

"He wants to get me planted there, and then he will tear back to England and go to her;" that was what she said to herself with that swift prolific way all jealous natures have of suggesting a possibility, and then she would set her jaw and clench her hands; "but I won't leave him, I won't. He is mine: he belongs to me. He made me his wife, and I shall stick to him all my life long. He need not try to deceive me with his kindness and anxiety, as if I did not understand it and see through it all."

With such a thought burning into her brain it can easily be seen that Dr. Westall could do nothing to move her.

He spoke out a few unpleasant truths to Marcia about her health, and the absolute consequences that would follow on her stubborn opposition to his wisdom, and when he left her he was in a fairly bad temper.

Mrs. Rochdale was waiting to catch him as he left the house.

"I hope you have succeeded," she began, for she had known of his determination to speak.

"I have done nothing of the sort," Dr. Westall answered with a growl. "Your daughter, Mrs. Rochdale, is not only a very wrong-headed young person, but an exceedingly rude one into the bargain. However, I have done with her. I have tried my best, and now I shall wash my hands of her. She can go her own gait in future, and a sorry one she will find it."

Mrs. Rochdale broke into tears. The good that was in her had worked its way of late through the crust of her selfishness and worldliness.

She was a mother and she was a woman. She would have been less than natural had she stood by complacently while she saw her child going headlong to her own destruction, and had shut her eyes to the misery and unhappiness that was Denis Latimar's daily portion.

"And I can do nothing—nothing," she said, brokenly: "that is the worst of all. I had hoped so much Marcia would have grown better as she grew stronger. I put down so much that happened before to her condition, but now there is no reason. She is very, very difficult, Dr. Westall, and sometimes I assure you when I try to advise her, she gets in such a fury she is almost as if she were not in her right mind."

Dr. Westall made no answer to this last remark. He said a few soothing words to Mrs. Rochdale, whose distress brought her nearer to his esteem than he could ever have thought it possible, and then he went his his way. His face was clouded as he was driven down the avenue, and his thoughts were heavy.

"Heaven help him!" he said to himself, "whatever mistake Denis has made in this matter, his punishment is come, and unless I am very much mistaken, more is at hand!"

And then Dr. Westall's thoughts turned, as they were wont to do, on Penelope, and he took out of his pocket a letter he had just received from her, in which she simply insisted on his going to her for a visit without delay, threatening all sorts of dire vengeance if he dared to disobey.

"You can manage it if you like—and you must like," Penelope wrote. "Fancy, I have been nearly a month here and you have never been to see me once. It is a very short journey, in fact I was considerably surprised on looking out your trains to find that Stevenstone is just on the borders of my county. So we are neighbours after all, and I shall expect you to regard Thicket Croft as your second home!"

Penelope had indeed been not only surprised but a good deal distressed to find that her new home was so close to her old one. She had not given the county a thought when she determined to take up her abode at Thicket Croft. It was true that a goodly number of miles stretched between her and Stevenstone, but that this distance could be encompassed sometimes Penelope had already learnt through some of her new acquaintances, who spoke of the Latimar hounds having an occasional finish in some one of the spots round about Thicket Croft, and of the excitement attendent on such occasions.

Penelope, with an uneasy pain at her heart, could only hope devoutly that such a thing might not happen this winter, or if it did, that she might be safely out of the way at the time and so avoid all discomfort.

From her aunt she heard that Denis and his wife were not going abroad. Penelope felt a vague thrill of pleasure and regret at this intelligence. It was always a source of joy to her to know that she was near to him, that they breathed the same air and lived in the same country, and yet paradoxically she desired that they should not do this; that they should be divided one from the other by illimitable space, a distance so great across which the yearning desire, the anguish of her love could not even pass.

It was somewhat of a blow to her to realise that they were so close now; but after the first feeling of pain and fear Penelope grew reconciled to the thought. She had put him so absolutely to the test—a year had more than rolled its weary length away and yet except for what she learnt from others Denis Latimar might have been a dead man to her.

Since that ever-remembered day in the old garden not by sign, not by written word, or by any deed had Denis endeavoured to hold

communication with her. He had obeyed her absolutely.

"We must never meet again—never—never!"

That is what she had said, and he had recognised the right of her determination and respected her decree. If Penelope yearned sometimes to see him, to have a word in his writing, to realise his absolute existence there always came the memory of Denis's submission to help her, of his unbounded respect, of his devotion. All this appealed as it would appeal to any high-minded woman, but oh! it was very hard sometimes to feel that no matter what he suffered, no matter what sorrow might shadow his life, she alone out of all the world must be silent, must never speak comfort or offer consolation.

She did not often let these sorrowful reflections have prominence in her daily life. Penelope had learned many little things during her year's sojourn under her uncle's roof, patience and self-restraint and a determination to attempt as much philosophy as was compatible with her nature. She was so sunny at heart that even her sorrow and her longing could not cloud her life altogether; and there had been no sound so sweet to the dead Hartwick Desborough as the music of Penelope's young laughter ringing out now and then through his gloomy house: she was indeed to him a veritable sunbeam.

It was not long before Lady Susan learnt to regard the girl very much in the same light. Penelope's sense of humour was generally the first thing that touched a congenial and sympathetic nature. Her healthy young beauty would have won her friends by the dozen; but it needed someone tuned just in her key to thoroughly grasp and understand the girl's full charm. And this is what Lady Susan Verschoyle speedily did.

They became fast friends, this old white-haired woman and this beautiful girl. The county were slightly jealous of Lady Susan's evident partiality for Miss Desborough; but after a while it became a recognised fact, and by degrees Penelope was spared the infliction of many visits. It came to be understood Miss Desborough went nowhere except to Lady Susan Verschoyle, and, consequently, it was also generally understood there was nothing to be gained by seeking her society.

This was just what the girl most desired. Life for her now was exceedingly pleasant. Cheered by the friendship of a woman whom she had grown to love as well as admire with the knowledge of her old friend's still devoted and stanuch. A beautiful home served by dependents who adored her, there was nothing but the remembrance of Denis, and the knowledge of her sister's absence to cloud the brightness of her lot. The memory of her beloved mother had become less of a grief now, though Penelope never ceased to regret that her present good fortune could not have been shared by that sweet mother.

So in her bright, happy seeking way doing all the good that was possible to her, and winning for herself a name in the neighbourhood around, which was synonymous with affection and gratitude, our pretty little Penelope found herself set fairly on a road of life, which, if it lacked the one great beauty, the one great treasure she desired, was yet full of pleasures of small joys of a content which was not to be measured by words.

She had settled down in a wonderfully short space into her new position, and before she had been mistress of Thicket Croft more than six weks, it seamed to her as though she could read her future life absolutely. It would be the same story month after month—a quiet, uneventful, contented existence which would last on till the blue of her eyes was dimmed and her dark hair sprinkled with silver.

And even while Penelope thought this in a dreamy, not dissatisfied way, events were drawing themselves together in her path, and danger was looming ominously in the distance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I HAVE some news for you, my dear," Lady Susan said one day as Penelope entered her cosy boudoir and bent to kiss her. The young mistress of Thicket Croft had ridden over to luncheon—a jaunt she performed on an average three or four times a week. "I do not think you will guess it, so I will not put you to the test."

"I know what it is," Penelope laughed, as she warmed her hands by the fire. "Nuttie's new coat has arrived from town."

Lady Susan shook her head with a laugh.

Nuttie was an old pug of large, not to say fat, proportions, who slumbered audibly in a luxurious basket.

"Then you have decided to sell Polly at last!" was Penelope's next guess.

Polly was a grey parrot who said very rude things sometimes, but who was much beloved of his mistress, and therefore the question of his rudeness was often overlooked.

Lady Susan shook her head a second time.

"Polly will pay you out for that remark," she said, quietly. "Try again."

Penelope unpinned her veil from her lovely glowing face, and took off her hat.

"My imagination absolutely fails me," she laughed. "The wind is so cold to-day, I am frozen entirely. I feel a very stupid person, Lady Sue!"

Lady Susan smiled.

"Ah! I knew you would never guess this news. I accept your very feeble excuse, but I am not convinced that it is altogether the fault of the cold wind; but when one really is stupid, well, one excuse is as good as another." And then Lady Susan produced a letter, and handed it to the girl. "My dear," she said, "there is my wonderful news; it certainly gave me a surprise, although there is nothing very startling in it after all—it is a very ordinary matter."

Penelope took the letter, and then turned a little aside as she began to read it. Her quick eyes had caught the printed address on the top of the page, and the big eagle with the two stars, which was the well-known crest of the Latimar family. The letter was from Marcia, and was not very long.

"Dear Lady Susan," Penelope read, "I am wondering if you will have thought me very rude not to have acknowledged before this the most kind letter you wrote me at the time of my illness. I sincerely hope you will forgive my seeming neglect. I was much touched by your kindness, and have often wished I might have had the opportunity of thanking you in person for your thought of me. I have, as I daresay you have heard, been more or less of an invalid these past weeks; but I am now almost quite recovered, and hope to be perfectly well before long. I am about to make a suggestion to you that I trust will not be disagreeable to you. Next week Denis and I have promised to be present at the ——shire hunt ball, which is to be held at Mr. Grantham's house, a near neighbour of yours, I am told. Will you think us too tiresome if I ask you to take us in for this occasion? Please do not hesitate to be frank with me, and to refuse if our visit should be in the least inconvenient. We can, of course, go to an inn, there is sure to be something of the sort near; but I have no doubt you will not allow this, for I remember your most kind invitation when I last saw you, and it is this remembrance that has prompted me to suggest inflicting ourselves upon you now. Denis is out hunting, or would, I know, send you his love, and wish kindest regards, and a sincere desire that I may not be making myself a nuisance, I am, dear Lady Susan, yours most truly,—

"MARCIA B. LATIMAR."

"There is but one answer to the letter," said Lady Susan, as Penelope read on to the end. "I have written already to Mrs. Latimar, and I have given Shorten all directions to prepare for the arrival of my guests on Monday. They will stay a week I expect, and I shall look to you, Penelope, to come over and help me amuse them!"

Penelope did not answer at once. She looked as if she felt a little troubled and a little perplexed.

This was something quite unexpected, and, moreover, there was an element in it that hurt her and gave a sense of annoyance.

"I wonder Marcia did not offer to come to me," she said, thinking her thoughts aloud. "It is funny she should not have done so, for my house is, at least, half way nearer to the Granthams than yours; but I suppose——" and then Pen stopped abruptly.

"But what, my dear!" asked Lady Susan, gently.

"I suppose I must really recognise the fact that my cousin does not want me. It is, after all, not very surprising," Penelope said, quickly, "for we know so little of one another, we have never been together as other cousins so frequently are, and our lives do not run in the same groove still——"

Still, Penelope could not help being hurt and disquieted by Marcia's manner towards herself. Although they had never been close companions, they had parted with a semblance of interest and friendship, and except that Marcia might be harbouring tardy feelings of vexation, because Penelope had refused to be bridesmaid at her wedding, Penelope could see absolutely no reason why her cousin should treat her so strangely and ignore her very existence.

She realised many little things in this moment of thought that had escaped her before. She remembered now that Marcia had never written to her once since her marriage, had never once invited her to Latimar Court, had never once sought to show that there was the smallest interest between herself and Penelope Desborough.

Shrinking from the mere thought of a sojourn under Denis's roof, never even having indeed the faintest shadow of such an idea in her mind at any time, Penelope had allowed Marcia's neglect to pass unnoticed; but now, all these things came to her, and she was forced to admit to herself as this last instance of Marcia's intention to ignore her was realized, that Mrs. Latimar had either some cause for anger against her or that she simply did not intend to trouble herself one way or another, about so unimportant a person.

The latter view of the case was after all the more likely. Penelope soon determined, and though of course it hurt her a little at first, it was on taking everything into consideration, perhaps the best and wisest thing that could have happened.

The more she thought the more Penelope realised this. Since Marcia ignored her so openly, she in her turn was not called upon to make any public recognition of her cousin and so she would be spared some hours—days of bitter pain—pain that would and must be inevitable in the event of a meeting between Denis and herself.

Lady Susan, looking at the girl before her, thought to herself she had very little difficulty in understanding Mrs. Latimar's treatment of her cousin—Lady Susan had taken a very speedy and shrewd measure of Marcia's nature and character, and she knew a little more of the world than Penelope. Moreover, if there had not been a question of her cousin's immense superiority in beauty, and, indeed, in everything else, Lady Susan would have easily understood the reason that prompted Marcia to choose to stay at her house for this hunt ball instead of seeking Penelope's hospitality. Marcia for all the pride of her present position was an utter snob, and would act and think as a snob to the end of her days.

"I don't think you need trouble yourself very much about her. Mrs. Latimar honours me because it suits her purpose to do so—once this visit is over I shall sink into oblivion again, no doubt; but I hope I shall survive that and much more. Come to luncheon, Penelope, and tell me all your news."

[DOCTOR WESTALL SPOKE OUT A FEW PLAIN TRUTHS TO MARCIA ABOUT HER HEALTH AND HER DISOBEDIENCE TO HIS ORDERS!]

They chatted away merrily through luncheon, but Lady Susan's quick sympathy had noted at once that there was a shadow across her sunbeam, and that Penelope made an effort to exert herself where usually she had no need to make any.

But the old lady never fathomed for a single instant the real cause for this shadow, and Penelope was only too content to let her think she was troubled by Marcia and by Marcia alone.

"If you do not see much of me next week," she said, as she rose to take her departure an hour or so later, "you will not think it is neglect on my part or forgetfulness, will you, dear Lady Sue?"

In answer Lady Susan drew her down and kissed her tenderly.

"Such things are unknown to my little Pen," she said with much love in her voice. "My dear, you know I know you, so why do you ask me such a question? I am sorry you have not decided to stay with me to-day, Pen, it feels to me like snow in the air; be sure and ride home quickly. Oh! of course, I remember, you have got your old doctor coming to see you to-day. I believe I am jealous of your doctor, Pen."

"You are both two silly persons," Penelope cried, with her own intimable impertinence, "for Dr. Westall pretends he is jealous of you. Now I must be off. Yes, I will take every care of myself, and you will see me to-morrow with my doctor. He has promised me to stay till to-morrow evening, but it is an immense concession, I assure you, and I have had such difficulty in getting him here at all."

Despite the emotions aroused naturally but the news Lady Susan had given her, Penelope managed to spend a very happy evening with her old friend. It was such a pleasure taking him all over her possessions.

"See, Uncle George, these are your apartments—I shall keep them always for you; and this is the room I am going to give Madge next week."

For Miss Riley had sent a hurried scrawl to Penelope, which Dr. Westall had delivered, asking for hospitality for herself and her married sister, for the ——shire hunt ball.

Penelope's answer had been sent, and was, needless to say, a delighted acquiescence.

It was not till they were seated at dinner that Penelope spoke of the Latimars. Ignorant that the doctor had guessed a great deal of the truth back in the old days, she felt it was behoven on her to speak of such a subject of mutual interest.

Dr. Westall laughed grimly at mention of Marcia's name.

"Don't inquire anything of me," he said, in his shortest way, "I have had the Latimar gates shut in my face!"

Penelope uttered a broken exclamation.

"Not Denis," she faltered.

"Denis!" cried the doctor. "No, no my little Pen. Denis Latimar is what he always was—one of the best young fellows in the world: not Denis! no indeed." Dr. Westall sipped his wine, "I ventured to tell Mrs. Latimar she was going the right way to kill herself, and she has dispensed with my services, Pen, that's all."

Penelope was silent a moment.

"Is—is she then very delicate?" she asked, when she spoke.

"With care Mrs. Latimar might, and could be as strong as anyone could desire to be; but she wants great care. She has no right to be here now. I ordered her south weeks ago. Her lungs are by no means in a satisfactory condition. She needs complete change—haling air, sunshine—not only to restore her strength, but to soothe her brain, which is in anything but healthy condition. Three or four months abroad in some corner of Italy would do wonders for her; but"—Dr. Westall shook his head—"she ought not to put her nose out of doors in this English spring weather. The consequences cannot but be bad."

"Then the going to this ——shire ball does not meet with your approval, Uncle George?"

Dr. Westall put down the glass he was lifting to his lips and frowned.

"Is this certain?" he asked, sharply.

Penelope gave him the news as she had received it from Lady Susan.

"Marcia writes she is quite strong," she finished.

Dr. Westall paused a moment.

"Denis knew nothing of this two days ago, I'll swear, for I met him in the village, and we had a short chat about her."

"Perhaps she thinks it is due to their position," Penelope suggested.

Dr. Westall snorted.

"She has got one of her devilish cranks in her head. Ah! I see it now. Someone has told her Madge Riley is going. Perhaps Denis, poor chap, may have said he ought to show up at the affair, and there you are."

Penelope was shocked and felt very miserable.

"And Madge is coming here!" she said, in a low voice. "Oh! Uncle George!"

"And why should you not have your friends here, I should like to know?" flared the doctor. "Must you consult that young virago for all you do? I tell you what it is, Pen: I shall come for this ball, too. It's a long time since I tripped the light fantastic toe; but I daresay I shall be all right when I get there. I'll have my red coat furbished up, and I'll dance with the best of them!"

Penelope smiled at this; but somehow her enjoyment was spoiled. Try as she would to push aside the feelings, she had an uneasy sensation that something unpleasant was going to happen, and it did not give her much comfort when she realised, as she did later on, that her old friend had the same feeling, and that he looked, as no doubt he was, troubled and slightly anxious.

(To be continued.)

[THE WARNING CAME TOO LATE. DOLORES LAY PRONE ON THE ROAD, A THIN RED STREAM ISSUING FROM HER FOREHEAD!]

BASIL'S BRIDE.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

At last, Dolores' strained ears caught the sound of a man's footsteps ringing on the paving stones. He was coming from the other end of the street to which she had entered, that is to say, from her right as she stood at the window. Would he prove to be a policeman? If so, she would risk everything and call to him—yes, or even if he were not a policeman, she would still cry out, supposing he did not see her message.

With what eager eyes she watched his progress down the street! Never had man seemed to walk so slowly, although, in reality, he was coming along at a pretty smart pace. Would that pace slacken as he came opposite this dreadful house?

Yes! Thank Heaven, it did. The light from the lamp opposite fell full on the white metal of the match box, and the man's eye caught it, and he stopped to pick it up.

A mist came before the girl's eyes while he stood looking at his find. Perhaps, after all, it would never strike him to look inside!

But here, again, fortune favoured her. He not only looked inside, but went across to the lamp in order that its light might enable him to read the writing on the scrap of paper he found enclosed.

After mastering its contents, he looked up in an uncertain sort of way, and Dolores waved her handkerchief to indicate her whereabouts.

Even then he hesitated. Your ordinary stolid Britisher has no liking for romance in real life, and this particular specimen of English manhood was no fonder than his neighbours of being mixed up with dubious adventures.

He was debating in his own mind whether he had not better go to the nearest police-station and invoke the aid of the police.

It also entered his head that he might be the victim of a hoax, but a closer examination of the hall mark on the match-box convinced him to the contrary.

People who play practical jokes don't risk the loss of articles of value, and his knowledge was sufficient to tell him that this elegantly chased little trinket must have cost a good deal of money.

As had been said before, the house next to Mrs. Brewer's was undergoing repair, and a scaffolding was erected in front of it, reaching up to the same level as Dolores' window.

The man looked at this scaffolding, and apparently came to a decision,

Waving his hand in token of encouragement to the wistful-eyed girl, he began to mount the scaffolding, and presently disappeared inside the next house, gaining access to it through one of the windows on the first floor.

A few minutes later, and he pushed his head out of a casement on exactly the same level as hers, and the young girl saw that he was a man of about middle age, and seemed like a workman.

"Now what's up?" he inquired—being near enough to her to speak in a lowered tone, and yet to make himself heard with perfect distinctness.

In a few hurried words she told him how she had been lured to the house, and what had happened since.

Her listener scratched his head in perplexity. The story was a strange one, and yet the perfect earnestness and simplicity with which it was related induced him to believe it true.

"Well," he said, at length, "it seems to me the best thing would be for me to go to the police-station, and bring a constable here, and then you could give these people in charge."

"How far is the police-station?" inquired the girl, feverishly.

"Oh, about half a mile or so away. I shouldn't be mor'n twenty minutes gone."

Twenty minutes! It seemed an eternity. What might not happen in twenty minutes? Besides, calling in the police, and giving Mrs. Brewer in charge meant courting an investigation on her own behalf, when her real name, and all the details of her flight from Chesham Royal would be made public property.

Better bear the loss of her property than run such a risk as that!

"No," she said, after a minute's reflection, "I dare not be left alone here even for twenty minutes. Could you not help me on to the scaffolding and then I could climb in at the window you are looking out of, and get into the street through the next house?"

"Yes," he answered, hesitatingly, "it might be done, I dessay, but it would be a little difficult."

"Never mind the difficulty. I have plenty of nerve, and I will do anything rather than remain where I am. See—the poles of the scaffolding are only a few feet away from me, and if you were to throw a plank across from it to this sill, I could easily manage to get on it; I will reward you for your trouble," she added, eagerly, seeing the reluctance expressed in his face. "Look—this silver chatelaine of mine is worth something, and it shall be yours the moment I set my foot in the street."

He was not an avaricious man, but he was a comparatively poor one, and the sight of those heavy silver chains was tempting.

"It's true, it might be done that way," he muttered reflectively, "and there's sure to be planks about, for the house is bein' overhauled from top to bottom. Yes, I think it might be done. You're sure you're not deceivin' me?" he added, suspiciously; "I don't want to get myself mixed up in any police-court business."

"There is not the slightest danger of your being mixed up in any such thing," she rejoined, with impatience. "When you have

once helped me down, you can go your way, and forget all about the events of this evening."

He seemed convinced by her earnestness, and withdrew from his post of observation to look for a plank which was necessary for the success of their plan. Before long he returned with one, and then came the job of fixing one end of it on the scaffolding, and securing the other to the sill of the window. To achieve this did not take many minutes; but after it was done, the man looked from it to Dolores in a manner expressive of considerable doubt.

"You'll want a steady nerve to manage it," he remarked. "You've got to walk over that plank with nothing to hold by, and with a fall of forty or fifty feet below you. If you make a false step, you'll break your neck to a dead certainty."

"I shall not fall," she rejoined, with decision—and yet she shuddered a little as she looked down at the cruel iron spikes of the railings that shut in the area. Yes, it would be a perilous walk, and the slightest failure of nerve would mean, as he said, Death.

It was only for a second she wavered, then throwing the casement of the window of her own room open to its fullest width, she gathered her skirts about her and stepped out.

* * * * *

She had not trembled when she made her perilous crossing, but now that the danger was all over, and she stood on the greasy pavement, with the night winds blowing on her forehead, her limbs almost refused their office, and she staggered forward, and caught hold of the railings for support.

But oh, the delicious sensation of ecstasy at feeling herself once more free! No harm could happen to her now with that star-sprinkled sky over her, even though she stood alone and penniless in the vast metropolis.

The fact of her pennilessness did not strike her in the first delight of her escape from her prison, and her strongest desire was to get away from this wretched place.

"Come," she said to her rescuer, who was staring at her with stolid astonishment, "walk with me to the end of this street, for fear I should meet either of those dreadful women, and after that you can leave me and go your own way."

He obeyed without remark. At the best of times he was not a loquacious person, but what small conversational powers he had were all scared out of him by the strange feeling of having assisted at a real adventure, in which he, somewhat against the grain it is true, had actually played the part of hero.

Arrived at the end of the street, Dolores came to a pause, and detaching her chatelaine from her dress, held it out to her companion.

"You need not be afraid. It is my own, and I have a right to dispose of it how I will," she said, with a slight smile, noticing his hesitation.

"It isn't that," he burst forth, "but you look such a young thing yourself, and if you are alone, why, you will want it yourself! Here, take it back. The matchbox is enough reward for what I have done for you."

But Dolores was peremptory, and utterly refused to avail herself of his generosity. She had given a promise, and she would fulfil it, no matter what the cost to herself might be. So finally the man took the pretty feminine ornament, and put it away in his pocket. Just then a church clock from somewhere near at hand chimed out the hour—eleven slow, dull strokes.

"Eleven o'clock!" Dolores exclaimed, in surprise, "I had no idea it was that time, although I might have guessed it was late from the deserted appearance of the street. Now good-night, and thank you very much for the service you have rendered me."

She held out her hand with her own pretty gracious smile, and he, after a slight hesitation, and a rubbing of his horny paw on his coat sleeve, took it.

"It's late for a young thing like you to be wandering about the streets alone," he said, sheepishly, as though not quite sure whether he had any right to offer opinion or advice. "I've got a daughter of my own, what's away in service, but I shouldn't like to think of her being about at this time o' night, with nobody to look after her. Where are you going to, if I might ask?"

"I don't know," she answered, a little vaguely. "I hadn't thought of it yet."

"You have friends in London?"

"No, not one."

"Dear heart!" exclaimed the man in consternation. He remained looking at her for a few minutes, gravely ruminating. "I don't know whether I am doing a right thing," he added, presently, "and I'm sure I don't know what the missis 'ull say, but I can't have it on my conscience to leave you here all by yourself. Come home with me, and we'll manage to give you a shakedown in front of the fire. It's only a couple of rooms we've got, and it'll be poor fare, but anyhow you'll be safe till morning."

It was not quite immediately that Dolores accepted this offer. Remembering how she had already been taken in once, she was shy of entering a possible snare a second time. But another look at the man's face reassured her. This was a very different person from the golden-haired Maude Stanley. Besides, he had already rendered her one service, which ought to be an earnest of his good intentions, and there was a rough fatherliness in his manner when he addressed her that was in itself a guarantee of good faith.

Accordingly, she accepted his offer, and followed him down a labyrinth of narrow streets, which for the most part seemed quiet and respectable, though the neighbourhood was evidently a poor one. He stopped at length in front of a house, in whose windows a light was burning, but before entering, he turned round a minute to whisper,—

"The missis has got a long tongue, and it's just possible she may give you the rough side of it. But never you mind—I'll take your part."

The room he led her into was beautifully neat and clean, though it served the purposes both of a kitchen and living room. In the centre of the boards—scrubbed as white as their nature would allow—was a square of carpet, and nearer the fender a rug, on which reposed a large black cat. A Dutch clock ticked on the walls, the firelight reflected itself in the brown polish of the windsor chairs, and on the table was spread a supper of bread and cheese, with a pennyworth of pickles in a cup, and a jug put ready for the master to fetch in the beer as soon as he arrived.

All these things Dolores saw in one momentary glance, then her eyes fell on the mistress of them—a hard-featured, sour-visaged woman of mature age, knitting away as if life depended on the number of stitches she achieved in a given time.

Her amazement when she saw her visitor was extreme. She rolled up her knitting, stabbed her needles into it, then got up and faced her husband.

"Who's that, I should like to know?"

"Wait a minute, Liza," he rejoined, deprecatingly—and Dolores noticed that his mien had grown much less bold since his entrance. "This 'ere young woman's alone in London, and without friends, so I thought p'r'aps we might give her shelter for the night, as it's so late."

"Oh, you thought that, did you? Well, it ain't the first time you've thought wrong, and I don't suppose it'll be the last. Though, what could have put it in your muddle-headed pate that I was going to have tramps in my house, goodness only knows—I don't! This ain't a lodging-house, and what's more, it ain't going to be turned into one."

"But, Liza—it's so late——"

"That's no business of mine. The young woman's friends should see as she isn't out at this time of the night."

"She says she has no friends, didn't I tell you?"

"More shame for her, then. That's a clear proof that she's not respectable, and you—a married man, with a daughter of your own—ought to be ashamed of yourself for getting mixed up with such people."

"But, Liza——"

"Don't, 'Liza' me!" cried the irate woman working herself up into a passion by the force of her own eloquence. "I say you ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I mean it. That young woman's not going to stop in this house—not if I know it! So, miss"—turning to Dolores with mock politeness—"the sooner you budge the better."

The young girl had listened to this colloquy in simple amazement, not indeed understanding the evil suspicions of the woman. But at these words, she quietly turned round and walked out of the house, while her quondam defender, who had been so brave outside when he told her he would "take her part," remained sheepishly behind, overwhelmed with the force and virulence of his wife's reproaches.

Without an idea where she was going, Dolores walked quickly along, asking herself forlornly what she was to do. She had no money, and her only article of jewellery, besides her wedding ring, was a small gold brooch which fastened her collar. Could she dispose of this, she wondered, and so get a night's lodging?

But all the shops were closed, and she dared not go to an hotel, for fear of being turned away from the doors. Alas for her hopes of getting some sort of situation, and earning a living for herself in London! What mockery such hopes seemed now.

"Things will look brighter in the morning, she said to herself, with a desperate effort to whip up her flagging courage. "If I could only get a bed for to-night I should not mind anything else."

Presently she found herself in Oxford-street—an almost deserted thoroughfare, where she kept well in the shadow of the houses so that the few pedestrians she met should not notice her.

She had no definite idea of where she was going—where could she go, indeed?—but her heart sank lower and lower with every footstep she took, and a stony despair settled down upon her.

From Oxford-street she turned down Regent-street—not because she knew it to be Regent-street, but because she had resolved to keep to great thoroughfares. Had she not heard of a bridge over the river where there were seats? Perhaps she might rest on one of those seats all night—it would be better than walking about in the darkness.

Finding her way more by instinct than anything else, she at length reached Waterloo-Bridge, and footsore and weary sank down on the seat in one of the recesses. How dark and mysterious the river looked, as its black flood rolled on under the starshine, the lights on either side piercing its gloom like flaming swords—how many terrible secrets it bore on its bosom as it swept towards the great unknown sea!

Dolores shuddered as she watched it. There was an eerie fascination for her in the sight of it, and the weird visions it conjured up. Was drowning an easy death, she wondered? She had heard so, or read it somewhere—and it was such a simple way out of one's troubles.

"Now then—move on, you there!" exclaimed a rough voice, and a policeman turned his lantern full upon her.

Meekly enough she rose to obey, but coming along the pavement was a troupe of noisy, half-drunken men and women, and fearful of what they might say to her, she turned hastily to cross the road.

"Look out!" cried the driver of a hansom

cab, that was bowling rapidly along across the bridge. "Look out, you fool!"

But the warning came too late, and though the man, tugging violently at the horse's reins, did his best to pull him up, he was not in time. Dolores lay prone on the road, a thin red stream issuing from her forehead.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FINGER OF FATE.

When Dolores recovered consciousness she found herself lying on a couch in a cosy little sitting-room, where a bright fire was burning. Someone was bending over her—feeling her pulse while he looked into her face very anxiously.

As her eyes met his, a troubled expression came in them, and she passed her hand a little wearily over her eyes. Surely her senses were playing her a trick—it could not be possible that the face she saw was that of Lascelles!

And yet it was his voice that presently spoke.

"Are you better now?"

"Yes, I think so. There is a pain in my head, but otherwise I feel quite well. How is it I am here?"

"I will explain that to you presently. Don't tire yourself with talking, or you will become exhausted. If you could sleep, it would be a good thing for you."

With gentle, almost womanly, tenderness, he arranged the cushions under her head, and drew up the bearskin rug he had thrown over her. Immediately afterwards there entered a middle-aged woman, with a kind, sweet face, and a soft footstep. She held in her hand a tray on which was set a covered basin.

"Is the lady sensible yet, sir?" she inquired in a whisper.

"Oh yes, and I have stopped the bleeding. But she has lost a great deal of blood, and is sure to be very weak after it. I am afraid it is impossible to think of moving her yet."

Dolores put her hand to her brow. It was bandaged round, neatly and firmly.

"It is not to be thought of," said the woman, in an indignant voice. "I myself would not consent to it. Poor young thing! The sight of her white face went to my heart when she was first brought in."

"Your heart is a very tender one, Mrs. Gervase," said Lascelles, smiling, and then the good woman, shaking her head slightly, knelt down by the side of the couch, and took Dolores' hand, which she patted softly within her own palms.

"You are quite safe, dearie," she murmured, in her soothing tones, that somehow comforted the girl without her being able to explain why.

"We will look after you, and see that you don't come to any harm. Now raise yourself on my arm—so!—and I will give you some beef tea."

She supported Dolores on her left arm while she administered to her the contents of the covered basin she had brought up, Lascelles watching the operation from the foot of the couch. He looked thoughtful and preoccupied—even troubled. Evidently the unexpected advent of Dolores filled him with apprehension.

"You are sure there is no necessity to send for a doctor?" queried Mrs. Gervase, rising from her knees after the patient had finished her beef-tea, and coming nearer Lascelles.

"Quite sure. As I told you, I myself am something of a surgeon, and my skill is equal to anything that may be required of it at present. The wound is little more than a flesh one, and will heal rapidly, I expect. For the rest, the young lady only wants quiet and good nursing, and you'll see she will soon be all right again."

"She shall have both!" exclaimed Mrs. Gervase, whose motherly heart had gone out at once to the injured girl. "I'll answer for that much."

"And I'll answer for the excellence of the nursing, Mrs. Gervase," Lascelles returned, much to his landlady's gratification. "You have taken a load off my mind by your kindness, for otherwise I should really not have known what to do with my unexpected visitor." He paused a moment, and beckoned her to the hearth, where they were farther away from Dolores, who would be therefore less likely to overhear what they said. "I don't mind confessing to you," he added, in a lowered voice, "that I am placed in rather an awkward position, for this young lady's husband has taken a great prejudice against me, and it is quite certain he will be seriously annoyed when he learns that she is here."

"But she did not come here of her own free will!" interrupted Mrs. Gervase, quickly. "Goodness only knows what brought her wandering about alone on Waterloo Bridge at near upon midnight; but it was no fault of her own, that I'll be bound. I know a good face when I see it, and I'd stake my life that she's good."

"You are right," he returned, quietly; "but all the same, I must take every care that her husband has no cause of complaint. Therefore, if you will let me, I will leave her in your charge, while I go to an hotel and stay there till she is well enough to be moved."

"I don't think you'll find any hotel that'll take you in at this time of night," returned Mrs. Gervase, dubiously.

"Oh yes, I shall. I'll risk that, provided you undertake the charge of the invalid."

Mrs. Gervase announced her willingness to do this—she had been a nurse, and although since her marriage she had renounced this vocation, yet she was by no means unwilling to return to it. She was one of those women—so rarely found, alas!—whose hearts overflow with the milk of human kindness and womanly sympathy. Anything in trouble appealed to her—from the mouse she had caught in a trap in the larder to the whining beggar who implored her charity at the area door!

If this had not been the case Lascelles would have found the difficulties of his position materially increased when a couple of policeman had brought Dolores in a cab to his apartments.

His surprise at the sudden apparition of the girl, whom he imagined to be carefully tended in her luxurious home at Chesham Royal, may be imagined, but he supposed that some unexpected event had brought Captain Chesham and his wife up to town; though what could have induced Dolores to be out alone at such a late hour he could not conceive.

Dolores was not in a fit state to be questioned, therefore he decided that all inquiries must be deferred until the morning. Meanwhile, he washed and dressed the wound in her forehead, and bandaged it up with deft, skilful fingers that told the occupation was not new to him—Mrs. Gervase assisting him in his work.

"Mr. Lascelles!" said a faint voice from the couch.

He instantly obeyed the summons, and the landlady considerately retired into the next room which communicated with the sitting-room by means of folding doors.

"You had better not talk too much," observed Lascelles, kindly. "I will see you again in the morning, and then you can say anything that you may have to say to me."

She made an expressive movement of dissent.

"I want to know how it is that I am here," she murmured, impatiently.

"That is easily told. You were crossing Waterloo Bridge and a cab-horse knocked you down. A policeman searched to see if he could find any clue to your identity, and he discovered in your pocket the letter I last wrote to you at Chesham Royal, enclosing my new address. Therefore he brought you here."

The explanation satisfied her. She remembered now that the dress she was wearing was the one she had on when Lascelles' letter arrived at Chesham Royal, and she had thrust the latter in her pocket, and well-nigh forgotten its existence afterwards.

"It was fortunate for me the address was there," she observed, smiling faintly. "If the policeman had found nothing, I suppose he would have taken me to a hospital?"

"Probably."

"I am glad he did not," she said, shuddering a little. "It would have been so dreadful to find myself there when my senses came back to me. Am I much hurt?"

"Not seriously."

"Does that mean that it will be a long time before I recover?"

"It means that the quieter you are the sooner you will be well," he rejoined, smiling. "I will be quite frank with you. The wound itself is not in the least serious, but you have lost a good deal of blood, and so you are very weak. It will take you some days to regain your strength; but beyond that there is nothing to fear. Now, I must absolutely forbid more talking. I am going to say 'good-night,' and after I am gone Mrs. Gervase will get you to bed, and you must try your best to have a good night's rest."

Saying which he bent down, and gently kissed her hand before leaving the room. Soon afterwards the girl fell into a refreshing slumber, in which all the sorrow of the present, all the shame of the past, all the fears of the future were forgotten, and from which Mrs. Gervase would not disturb her.

"She could not sleep better even if she were in bed, and as long as that's the case I'll let her stay where she is, pretty dear!" murmured the good soul, gently pulling up the rug. "Mr. Lascelles says she hasn't got a mother; but if she had, that poor mother would be in trouble about her to-night, I'm sure."

In the morning, when at about ten o'clock Lascelles came round to his lodgings, he found Dolores propped up on a pile of cushions on the couch, and looking white, it is true, but certainly not ill.

Her night's rest, together with her youth and good constitution, had almost made her well enough to be up and about as usual; but Mrs. Gervase, in her character of nurse, had sternly forbidden "any tricks of that kind," as she termed it.

"This dreadful bandage!" she exclaimed, half playfully, half petulantly, as Lascelles approached. "Can I not have it taken off?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid. But what makes you object to it so much. Isn't it comfortable?"

"Oh yes, comfortable enough, only I look like nothing so much as an Egyptian mummy while it is on."

Lascelles shook his finger at her archly.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity! So you have been studying yourself in the looking-glass to see if your beauty is intact. Why did you allow it, nurse?" turning to the landlady.

"To tell you the truth, sir, it was I who gave the young lady the mirror, because I wanted her to see her pretty face wasn't injured by her accident, that's to say only temporary, you know. In a fortnight's time the wound will be hardly visible," rejoined Mrs. Gervase, who had donned a clean, stiff muslin cap and apron to match, and in this costume looked a regulation nurse.

Presently she disappeared into the other room, and then Lascelles, who had been testing his patient's strength by feeling her pulse and taking her temperature, said, gently and gravely,—

"Now, I want you to answer some questions, Mrs. Chesham. I did not put them last night because you were inclined to be feverish, and I thought it safer to refrain; besides, I had an idea that there might be something——" He paused, a little awkwardly and coughed, without completing his sentence. "In point of fact, it is necessary to let your

husband know without delay of the accident that has befallen you."

A burning blush took the place of her former pallor, and her eyes drooped beneath his.

"But that is just what you must not do!" she cried, in an eager whisper. "I have very special reasons for wishing to keep him in ignorance of where I am."

Lascelles face expressed first extreme surprise, then dismay.

"You have left home without his knowledge?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, and left for ever!"

A quick little exclamation broke from his lips, and he turned away, and stood at the window staring out at the road in front. Not a very delectable view, for these rooms of his looked out on the Waterloo-road, where a constant stream of carts, vans, omnibuses, and other vehicles of nondescript character passed and repassed in a never ending succession. When he returned to the young girl's side his face was still grave and clouded.

"This is serious news, my dear Mrs. Chesham, but I hope it is not so serious as your words would imply. You and your husband are both young, and between young married people often arise little misunderstandings that are as sudden as a summer cloud—and as evanescent. If you and Captain Chesham have had a quarrel, believe me it is nothing more than one of these summer clouds."

She sat upright, and returned his gaze steadily.

"No, Mr. Lascelles, in this instance you are wrong, for nothing can ever bring me and my husband together again. I do not say we have had a quarrel, for that would be misleading; I simply say that circumstances have parted us, or rather have made it necessary that we should be parted, and yesterday morning I took the initiative in my own hands, and left Chesham Royal for good."

"Without your husband's knowledge?"

"Without his knowledge. At the same time it was his desire as much as my own—his suggestion, indeed, that we should be separated. So you see there is not the smallest fraction of a reason why you should communicate with him. Do you understand?"

"I am afraid I don't understand," he replied, gravely, "but I must accept your word, sad as it all seems to me."

She sighed a little wearily—as one sighs at melancholy twice-told tale.

"It is sad—very sad, but I suppose life itself is sad."

"You are young to be so cynical."

"Am I young? Sometimes I doubt it. Do you know," clasping her hands together, and looking up at him with piteous wistful eyes, "when I woke this morning, it seemed to me as if I had suddenly grown old and mistrustful—as if I doubted whether the world contained such things as love and goodness and truth."

"That was because both mind and body had been unhinged by the events of the last few days. When both have recovered their balance, you will be your own bright, happy self again."

"Never!" emphatically. "It is impossible that I can ever be happy again. I don't think," with a wan, little smile, "I ever want to be. If I can be at rest, that is all I require."

Lascelles looked at her in doubt and distress. He hardly knew how to proceed. On the one hand it was necessary he should know something of her plans, and of what had driven her from home, but on the other hand he shrank from soliciting her confidence.

"You had my letter giving you this second address in your pocket," he said, presently. "Am I to take it that you intended making use of it?"

"No," she returned, simply. "The fact of its being there was an accident, nothing more nor less, and I am afraid I must admit that I had forgotten all about it. It is a wonder that it was left in my possession, seeing that all the rest of the things I had in my pockets were taken from me."

And then she described to him the events of the preceding day—a recital to which he listened with absolute horror.

"Good Heavens! what dangers you have escaped!" he exclaimed, in profound agitation. "That blow of the cab horse on Waterloo Bridge was a direct interposition of Providence on your behalf; for what would have become of you if the accident had not happened, Heaven alone knows!"

"I should have gone to look for some employment," she said, simply. "I would have offered myself as a girl in a shop, or even as a domestic servant if I could have found nothing better. Indeed, that is what I must do still, I suppose, but somehow I can't think things out at all clearly this morning. Directly I try to do so, my brain seems to get in a muddle."

"A sure sign that it needs rest—and well it may, considering all it has gone through!" returned Lascelles, with a half-smile that was almost immediately chased away by an expression of grave thought.

The situation was both serious and complicated, and strangely enough the responsibility of it had fallen on him.

"Unfortunately, Basil Chesham would never allow me to make a friend of him," he muttered, more to himself than to her. "He mistrusted me from the first, and nothing I could do would overcome his prejudice. All through he objected to my friendship for you."

"Because he misunderstood it," put in Dolores, quickly.

"Exactly. I saw that, even while I dared not explain the real origin of the deep interest I took in you and your welfare."

"But there is no reason why you should not explain it to me!" she said, fixing her bright, clear gaze curiously on his face.

He seemed to hesitate, and then shook his head.

"The time has not come yet. Wait a little longer, and you shall know everything. Meanwhile, we must consider what is best to be done at once. Will you not be guided by my advice, and let me telegraph to Captain Chesham your whereabouts?"

"No—distinctly no! Indeed, I positively forbid your doing it, and I trust to your honour to obey me. If I thought there were the smallest danger of your betraying me, I would get up this very moment, weak as I am, and lose myself in the crowds of this great city!"

There was no doubting her sincerity—voice and manner both affirmed it. Lascelles recognized this, and sighed helplessly.

"I had a presentiment when I left Chesham Royal that a crisis of some kind was approaching," he said, "but I never thought it would take this dire shape. It was from quite another quarter that I feared danger."

"You feared danger! For whom?"

"For you—and through you, your husband."

"And was it because of that you asked me to send to you if I were in trouble?"

"Yes; because, if the danger had taken the form I apprehended, then I was literally the only person who could have helped you."

Dolores knitted her brows together in a puzzled fashion.

"This sounds very mysterious, Mr. Lascelles; and I don't like mysteries!"

"Neither do I—neither do any of us, I imagine, out of novels. But when they are there, what are you to do? There is one matter I want to ask you about." His voice was not quite firm, and Dolores noticed that, as he put up his hand with a nervous movement to stroke his moustache, the long white fingers trembled. "I read in one of the newspapers an account of the finding of that poor lady's body in the cavern at Priors Abbey."

"You mean Mrs. St. Maur's?"

He started slightly, but recovered himself almost immediately.

"Yes, Mrs. St. Maur's. Will you tell me all the circumstances attending the discovery? I am afraid it may be a painful recital for you, but I have a special motive for asking it."

Wondering somewhat at his evident agitation, she nevertheless obeyed, and graphically described the thunderstorm in which she and Travice were caught, and its tragic consequences. Just as she finished there came a quick knock at the door, and Mrs. Gervase entered, bearing a telegram in her hand.

CHAPTER XXX.

TRAVICE'S STORY.

The telegram proved to be for Lascelles, and on reading it he seemed a little disturbed.

"I shall have to go and see my solicitor at once, I find, but I will not be away longer than I can help, though I'm afraid I can't get back for three hours. On my return we will decide where you had better go," he said to Dolores, and soon afterwards he departed, impressing on her the necessity of lying quite still, and thus resting brain and body during his absence.

One half of the command she was able to obey, but the other was out of her power. His last words had suggested to her the unwelcome thought that it was impossible she could stay where she was, and that the wearisome business of finding lodgings must be all begun over again. How she hated the thought of it.

By-and by she fell into a light slumber, and Mrs. Gervase took the opportunity of slipping out of the room in order to attend to her domestic duties downstairs.

Not long after her departure the door opened very softly, and a woman entered. A moment she stood on the threshold, pressing her hands against her beating heart, then she ran forward and threw herself on her knees beside the couch, while she caught Dolores' hand in both her own and covered it with kisses.

"Oh! my dear one, my beloved!" she cried out. "Thank Heaven that I have found you—thank Heaven, thank Heaven!"

She burst into a passion of tears, and Dolores, thus suddenly awakened from her slumber, looked at her at first in puzzled bewilderment, that gradually gave place to alarm.

"Has my husband discovered where I am, Travice?" she exclaimed, hardly above her breath, while she looked apprehensively around, as if afraid of meeting Basil's accusing eyes.

"No, my mistress, he is still at Chesham Royal; and, so far as I know, has discovered nothing."

"Then how have you traced me so quickly?"

The question seemed to embarrass Travice slightly, but she answered after a momentary hesitation,—

"One day I happened to see on your dressing table a letter, and the address at the top caught my eye. For some reason or other it impressed itself on my mind, and when I found out at Chesham station that you had come to London, it struck me at once that you must be here. I cannot tell you why this was so—it was instinct more than reason perhaps. I came up from Chesham yesterday, and should have come on here at once, but in the train I was taken ill, and was fit for nothing but to go straight to bed as soon as I reached a hotel. I was afraid I was going to be seriously ill, but I determined to risk everything, even death itself, rather than not come to you, for I felt that you needed me."

It was natural that Dolores should be touched by this devotion. Tears started to her eyes, and she pressed Travice's hand gratefully.

"It is very good of you to care for me so

much," she murmured, but Travice interrupted her with a sudden vehemence.

"There is no goodness in it, Dolores. It is nature speaking as she has spoken since the creation of the world—as she will continue to speak until the elements are once more dissolved into nothing. Darling, prepare yourself for a great surprise. The time has come when you must know the the truth. I am your mother!"

"My mother!" The words dropped from the young girl's lips in a faint whisper, and as she spoke them she fell back against the pillows with a strange sort of gasp. "My mother!"

"Yes, your own mother, although for reasons that shall be told you later on I have been forced for all these years to conceal my identity. Did you never suspect it, Dolores? Did no voice ever speak in your heart telling you that your so called maid was bound to you by the nearest, and dearest of human ties?"

She asked the question very eagerly, and leaned forward over the girl in her intense anxiety to catch the answer. But no answer came. If Dolores had given one, it would have been a negative, and she restrained herself for fear of wounding the ardent-eyed woman at her side.

"Is this true?" she murmured, bewilderedly.

"It is Heaven's own truth," cried Travice, with solemn, eager assurance. "Don't you believe my word—my oath even?"

"I know not what to believe. It is so strange, so overwhelming. But how is it that you have kept away from me all these years?"

"My darling, I have not kept away from you. On the contrary I have risked everything in my resolve to be with you. Do you remember Abdul, Dolores?"

"Abdul, our Hindoo servant at the White House! Of course I do."

"And how devoted he was to you?"

"Yes, I remember. He was affection itself; but what has that to do with the question?"

"Everything. Under the disguise of a servant, I watched over you at the White House even as I did at Chesham Royal."

"You mean to say you and Abdul are one?"

"Yes. It may well surprise you. I expected it would, for I contrived to preserve my disguise so perfectly at the White House that not a creature suspected I was other than the character I represented."

"But my father, did he know?"

An imperceptible shadow crossed the woman's brow.

"Yes, he knew. Hard as he was on me in other ways, he recognised the high claims of a mother, and so he allowed me to be near you, on condition that you were kept in ignorance of the relationship subsisting between us. He intended to reveal the truth to you himself, but fate willed it otherwise, and he died with the secret untold. Indeed, just before his death, I angered him greatly, for I protested with all my strength against your marriage with Basil Chesham. Unfortunately, all I could say was of no avail. Your father was an obstinate man, and once resolved, he took his own way in spite of any opposition."

There was a tone of bitterness in her voice that grated on Dolores' ear. She seemed to suspect this, for she added almost immediately,—

"Have you no word of love for the mother from whom you have been separated all these years—have you no return for the affection that I have lavished upon you, while for your sake I have borne a martyrdom from which the most devoted woman on earth might well have shrank? It has been for your sake all through, Dolores!"

Still holding the young girl's hands she drew a little backward, and gazed beseechingly into her eyes. Dolores was not proof against the mute appeal of that glance. All her doubts, her fears, her involuntarily drawing back melted away, and she threw herself into Travice's arms, while a quick, excited sob broke from her lips.

It seemed as if her mother could never hold her long enough in her embrace. Over and over again she released her, only to draw her back once more and strain her tighter to her bosom. At last Dolores' ear caught the sound of a footstep outside, and she said, hastily,—

"Here is the landlady coming. What am I to say to her?"

"Tell her I am your maid—it is best to keep up the old deceit for the present," promptly responded the other, instantly on the alert.

She rose from her kneeling position by the couch and withdrew a little distance, composing her face to its usually calm expression.

Mrs. Gervase was naturally surprised at the presence of a stranger, but when she learned that the stranger was the lady's maid, her surprise changed into respectful sympathy. To have a lady's maid argued a certain position, and the good landlady—who had been purposely kept in ignorance by Lascelles of Dolores' name—became confirmed in her idea that her patient was "someone of importance."

"I only came to see if you wanted anything, ma'am," she observed, pleasantly, and having assured herself on this score she withdrew.

Directly she had gone Travice, as we must for the present still continue to call her, resumed her old position.

"You must leave this place at once," she said, decisively. "There is not a moment to be lost in getting you away."

"But why?" inquired the girl, innocently.

"Don't you see what people would say if they heard that you had run away from your husband and taken refuge with Mr. Lascelles?"

A deep blush overspread Dolores' face. This was an aspect of the question that had never struck her, but she recognised its seriousness immediately.

"After all, the fact of my being here is due to an accident," she murmured, in distress.

"I know that, my darling; but the world would not believe it—the wicked censorious world, which is always ready to think the worst! Your good name is very dear to me, and it must be my first consideration."

Dolores was thinking that Lascelles himself must have had this in his mind when he went out an hour ago, for he, too, had been anxious that she should leave his rooms, and that from no lack of hospitality.

"Where am I to go?" she asked, helplessly.

"With me, of course. Leave all to me, dearest. I will arrange matters satisfactorily, you may be sure. Now get up, lean on my arm, and tell me if you feel equal to walking downstairs," raising her as she spoke to her feet, and supporting her tenderly.

Yes. Dolores could walk well enough, although the effort made her head throb rather painfully.

"That is right," observed her companion. "Now sit down again, so as not to tire yourself. How long will Mr. Lascelles be away?"

Dolores informed her about two or three hours, and Travice seemed satisfied. She did not think it necessary to tell Dolores that she had waited outside in the Waterloo-road for a good hour before she had seen him leave his rooms, and that it was only when she was quite sure of his absence that she had ventured to enter.

There were very powerful reasons why, at this juncture, she shrank from meeting him.

"Now," she said, "I will go out and get a carriage, and then we will drive to a house I have taken at Dulwich, where you will be safe from all fear of pursuit—for some time at least. Meanwhile, write a note to Mr. Lascelles, telling him that you have decided it is better to leave at once, and that you trust to his honour not to attempt to follow you or to find out your address. You may add that you will communicate with him later on."

She kissed the young girl very tenderly before she went out, and Dolores prepared to obey her wishes.

As a matter of fact the latter was so bewildered with the events that had followed each other with such lightning-like rapidity during the last two days, that her brain was perfectly dazed, and it was a relief to her to have a strong, dominating intelligence to rely upon in this crisis of her life.

Such an intelligence the woman whom we have known by the name of Travice undoubtedly possessed, and for the moment Dolores was prepared to obey her implicitly. Whether her influence would remain as strong when the girl had quite recovered the shock to brain and system that the accident of last night had given her, was yet to be proved.

Before leaving the front door in order to get her carriage, Travice took the precaution of drawing down the heavy veil she wore, and as she went out she cast one quick, searching glance around as if to make sure there were no spies about.

She saw nothing to excite her alarm. It is true a policeman, who was passing at the time, looked her rather hard in the face, but the man was a perfect stranger to her, and so, she argued, there was not the slightest fear that he knew her.

She had no difficulty in getting a cab—a four-wheeler, with a fairly decent horse harnessed to it. It was the work only of a few minutes to put on Dolores' hat and mantle and then to help her downstairs; but as mother and daughter stood in the passage, the latter said, suddenly,—

"I cannot leave without thanking Mrs. Gervase for her kindness to me."

"You will be able to do so another time. At present every moment is precious to us."

"Another time will not do. Surely you would not wish me to be so basely ungrateful, as to go without an acknowledgment of what she has done for me!"

Travice did not answer, although she looked extremely annoyed, and cast anxious glances backwards and forwards as though she feared even yet, the success of her plan would be imperilled by some unlooked for interference.

Dolores, not to be persuaded this time, rang a little bell which she knew communicated with the downstairs regions, and seeing that her remonstrances were useless, the elder woman produced from her purse a five pound note, which she pressed into her daughter's hand.

"Give this to the landlady. It will be a convincing proof of your gratitude."

Which it was! Five-pound notes do not grow on gooseberry bushes, so to speak, and very few of them came in the way of poor, kindly Mrs. Gervase. Her thanks for the gift was profuse, and maybe it stopped the expression of her astonishment at this sudden flitting.

"Drive to No. —, Brunswick square," said Travice, in an audible voice to the cabman, after she had settled Dolores comfortably in one corner of the cab, and followed her in.

"Brunswick-square!" repeated the girl in surprise. "I thought you told me we were going to Dulwich!"

"So we are, but I have to take precautions against our being followed. The cabman understands however, and will drive us to our proper destination in good time. As I told you before, darling," the woman added, taking up one of Dolores hands and kissing it softly, "you may set your mind at rest, and leave everything to me. Your happiness is my one object in life, and I will take care that it shall not be imperilled in the future."

Dolores closed her eyes. It seemed to her that as she found it impossible to understand the position, or penetrate the mystery that surrounded her mother's life, the only thing for her to do was to yield herself passively to fate, until such time as an explanation should be given her.

She wondered vaguely what would be the

end of it all. But one thing seemed clear to her. It was useless to struggle against the strong hand of fate—fate in whose dark stream her own life was tossed, like some frail barque on the great rolling waves of a tempestuous ocean.

(To be continued.)

THE RAVENDALE MYSTERY.

CHAPTER XV.

WAS IT MURDER?

An American humourist relates a story of a settler named Dow, whose whole life seemed to be regulated on a plan precisely the reverse of his own wishes. At one time his greatest wish, as well as his greatest need, was to find water. Seeing indications of a well on his land, he dug and found not water, but gold.

Fricker's feelings on discovering Philip Ravendale's crime of felony and imposture must have been much the same as this Dow's, with the difference that the one got much more than he expected as a result of his labours, and the other much less.

Fricker had no mean opinion of his own cleverness, nor was he slow to admit that he had arrived so far towards unravelling the web that had woven itself around the death of Sir Richard Ravendale only by dint of marvellous astuteness.

Still, it was provoking that when his efforts had been directed to bring about a certain result, to bring to light a certain crime—the greatest according to human judgment, though who knows but that in the records of eternity the crime of wrecking a man's happiness may not be entered as deserving of greater punishment than the crime of slaying a man's body?—it was intensely annoying to the detective to have to confess that he had unearthed only a felony and a fraud—a clever felony, and altogether surrounded with greater interest than would attach say to the abstraction of a bag of sovereigns from the Bank of England, or a packet of diamonds from a jeweller's shop; an interesting fraud to be sure, but still a minor crime.

Fricker had serious thoughts of at once arresting Mrs. Vance without further proof, by way of avenging himself on circumstance and gratifying his spleen.

"I've no proof that she didn't do it," he thought. "She hasn't shown herself to possess much of a conscience or any sort of principle. All this fraud of Philip Ravendale's was of her plotting evidently."

She it was who, possessing the secret of his birth had suggested that the secret should be kept, the concealment to be on terms advantageous to herself. She it was who, after levying her blackmail for years, had betrayed the man she had in her power, thus showing herself destitute even of the honour that exists among thieves.

Her own daughter had accused her of being a murderess. Was it not probable that the accusation was made on stronger grounds than the mere knowledge that her mother had been with Sir Richard during the time immediately preceding his death. An accusation made against a parent on such slender grounds would be, to say the least of it, unnatural in a child. When the news of the death was brought to the girl, had she not inquired in alarm by whose hand it had been compassed, and even when assured that Sir Richard had died of heart complaint, had she not harped on about murder, showing that in her inmost heart she knew better than to attribute the death to the cause assigned by others?

Would Mrs. Vance have been so ready to fly on the first hint that foul play was suspected, unless she had some reason for her flight? It was all very well for her to declare that she did so in the full knowledge that her visit to Sir Richard, if it came out, might render her liable to suspicion. Of course it would; but flight put her equally under suspicion, and had she been perfectly innocent, why did she not come forward at the first, and own to the visit? There was no question of murder then, none suspected that the death was not the result of natural causes—none save the woman who knew the truth, she and her own child who guessed it.

Her mode of exit spoke strongly against her. If it were true that she was in no way connected with the death, would not her first impulse have been to summon aid when she saw Sir Richard sink helpless to the ground? In every woman there is the instinct to render aid in sickness and weakness; would mere caution get the better of that instinct? The fact of her being found in the room with a man who had swooned, as she professed to believe, would not necessarily have resulted in a full explanation of her presence. The fact of her flight was the strongest possible evidence against her innocence.

"If it had only been brought in murder at the inquest I'd arrest her at once; but I'm responsible not only for arresting the right person, but also for finding out that it was actually murder, so I have to be doubly careful. It has never been proved that it was murder. A good half of the evidence went to show that it wasn't. The medical evidence was pretty equally divided. Old Parr didn't seem to be up to much; on the other hand Dr. Edden was only called in at the eleventh hour, and had not the same opportunity of judging. I wonder if Chalfont could throw any light on it. I've a good mind to go and see him—and I will. I hope he'll say it was murder. If he does—I'll arrest Mrs. Vance. Either she murdered Sir Richard Ravendale, or he died of heart disease, one or other—one or other," mused Fricker, as he took the account of the Ravendale inquest out of his drawer.

Chalfont was not as yet enrolled in the ranks of medical practitioners; he had not even got the length of "advice and medicine, sixpence," which is very often the first rung of the ladder by which a medical man in London climbs to eminence in his profession, and which, strange though it may appear, pays not only in money but in the far more valuable coin of experience.

Chalfont was a medical student and a promising one. Fricker had come across him about a year before. Whilst investigating a poisoning case that at the time created a good deal of interest, he had received a communication from Chalfont, who, stranger though he was, ventured to give the detective information upon certain points, apparently overlooked by the medical men who had charge of the post-mortem, and who had given evidence.

The clear way in which the information was given commended his unknown correspondent to Fricker, and he put himself into communication with the young man, and owed it to him, in a great measure, that he had been enabled to arrive at the solution of the case.

Since that time the detective had kept up a sort of connection with Chalfont, who was uncommonly clear-headed, and had a way of hitting at the very centre of a thing in spite of intervening disguises and barriers.

He wasn't infallible in his opinions—no one is—and he had not Fricker's talent for following the wanderings of a labyrinth of mystery, but where it concerned the medical aspect of a case he was naturally more capable of passing judgment than the detective.

To him, accordingly, Fricker took his present difficulty. Chalfont knew something of the Ravendale Mystery, of course. Who did not that read the daily papers? But of the singular details that had come to Fricker's knowledge Chalfont was, like everyone else, profoundly in the dark. It was not known outside Scotland Yard that the Vances were found, and Fricker had told no one—not even his chief or his colleagues about Philip Ravendale's secret.

That the subject under discussion was interesting to both of them was manifest from the number of hours the detective spent with his medical friend. It was already getting late in the afternoon when he found himself once more in the streets. Those hours had not been spent in vain, judging from the expression on Fricker's face. He looked like a man pleased with himself and with all the world beside. Chalfont's verdict was what he had hoped for. Chalfont had set at rest whatever doubt there existed as to the cause of Sir Richard Ravendale's death.

It was strangulation, or rather asphyxia brought about by strangulation, not heart disease. So said Chalfont, and Fricker knew that it was true; nevertheless, he did not abide by the programme he had arranged before he went to see Chalfont. He did not at once arrest Mrs. Vance, but he rushed away to Ravendale Hall and set himself to work to win the confidence of Thomas the butler, the man who had been slighted at the inquest—who had been told he was wasting time.

It will be remembered that Thomas had granted the possibility of Fricker not being altogether brainless. Fricker had been heard to express an opinion that the old man's story about "Prince" might have something in it. Still Thomas Giddings had sworn eternal hatred to coroners, coroners' juries, inquests, detectives and police, and it was only by the exercise of tact that Fricker induced the old man to look upon him with a friendly eye.

He poured out the story of his wrongs to Fricker as he poured it out to everyone with whom he came in contact, and he wound up by declaring that the coroner was a fool, and didn't know his business. Much to his astonishment the detective agreed with him.

"He's a blundering jackass and a mean rapscallion!" went on Thomas, waxing eloquent in his vituperations.

"He's that and more," agreed Fricker, thinking that any means justified the end he had in view, namely, to obtain certain information from Thomas.

"Let us shake hands over that," suggested Fricker.

"With all my heart," responded Thomas.

"And what do you say to a glass of ho water with something stiff in it at the 'Goat in Boots,' in which we may drown all such blundering idiots? What do you say to it—eh, Thomas?"

Thomas didn't say much, for he heard a footstep in the passage within, and he didn't want to be found by his fellow-servants in close confabulation with a detective—one of the class he had forsworn. However, he said what Fricker wanted him to say. He said,—

"I'll be there about eight o'clock."

Not wishing his visit to Ravendale Hall to attract more attention than it was possible to avoid, Fricker had entered the grounds by the small side gate near Woodbine Cottage, the gate by which Arthur Wyndham had left, and by which Mrs. Vance had entered on the memorable Monday, and by it Fricker made his exit and took the road to the inn, passing Woodbine Cottage on his way he heard voices inside the hedge that shut off the little garden from the road. He stopped to listen.

"Oh, Arthur, if the truth should never come out!" said a soft, girlish voice.

"That is just it," replied someone—a man. "That is just it. I have began to think it never will. Can there be a God in Heaven that such injustice is allowed to be done on earth? God's earth they call it! It is the devil's rasher!"

"Arthur!" said another voice—a woman's, though not the one that had spoken before. "Arthur, my son, unsay those words, or God may indeed turn his face from you. Have I not told you that this is your cross, and according as you bear it, or sink under it, will your reward be. Bear it, and you will

triumph over it; sink under it, and it will crush you."

"I know it, mother I know it. Heaven help me!" was the reply.

"Heaven will help you, my son, if you will have patience."

"I will have patience, mother, for your sake and her's. My hope is in your love, and Heaven alone knows how the thought of your love and your belief has helped me in this trouble."

"It has been our trouble too, Arthur," said the girl, "and when it ends for you it will end for us all three."

"Heaven grant that may be soon!" said the young man, humbly.

They had reached the gate by this time. Norah Blake—for it was she—opened it and stepped into the road, and, behold! she found herself face to face with "that horrid detective." With a startled cry she turned to warn Arthur of danger.

"The detective! He has come——" she gasped.

"To tell you that your trouble is over," supplemented the detective, who, in face of what he had just heard, and the sight of the agony on the girl's face could no longer keep up his professional reticence. The sight of human suffering had changed him from a machine for the sifting of circumstances into a human being with a heart.

Arthur and his mother, who had joined Norah on the road, both looked stupefied by the detective's announcement. Norah was evidently suspicious that this was some trap, and she clung to Arthur's arm. Not one of them uttered a syllable.

"If you will let me go inside," said Fricker. "There may be listeners about here, and it won't do for this to get about just yet; it might spoil everything."

"Is it really—true that he is—that you have discovered the murderer?" asked Mrs. Wyndham, when they were seated in the sitting-room with the door closed, "that my son is proved innocent?"

"It is quite true that he was not the last person that saw Sir Richard Ravendale alive," replied Fricker. "I have proved it."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Wyndham.

Norah Blake could only show her joy in tears, whilst Arthur was momentarily deprived of capability for either speech or action.

"Who was it?" he blurted out at last.

"That I dare not tell you, sir. You will know by this time to-morrow, I hope. I must ask you to keep what I've told you quiet. I had no business even to tell that much; but I may rely upon all of you."

"We would be ungrateful indeed if we rewarded your kindness by abusing your confidence," said gentle Mrs. Wyndham.

Fricker's conscience reproached him for not having done them this kindness long ago when it was in his power. "I was bound to do my duty first," he consoled himself by thinking.

"By the way, miss, I've got some of your property in my pocket," he remarked.

"My letter!" cried Norah, snatching it from him.

"A dangerous letter it was, too," said Fricker.

"Dangerous? You mean that it strengthened your suspicion? So it must have done," glancing through it. "Oh, Arthur, can you ever forgive me for this? How thoughtless of me!"

"I should say," put in Fricker, with a smile, "that the day isn't far off when you won't need to write to him."

The young people understood his meaning, and Norah blushed.

Having finished this mission of mercy, Fricker went on to the "Goat in Boots," where Thomas joined him at the hour he had appointed.

Over a steaming glass of toddy, the old butler became communicative. At the detective's request he went over the whole story of the finding of "Prince" howling dismally by the foot of his master's dead body.

"And after you had put the body to rights, what then?"

"Then I went to carry away the reading lamp that was standing on the table, and I noticed that Sir Philip had left a lot of papers strewed about, and a box with more papers in it was open, and the bunch of keys hanging from the lock. I supposed Sir Philip had been looking them over, and had been called out of the room and meant to come back and put them up. I didn't like to leave them about, so I took the liberty, being an old servant of the family, of putting the papers all into the box and turned the key, and then I took out the bunch of keys to take them to Sir Philip along with his handkerchief, which he had forgotten."

"Where did you find the handkerchief?"

"On the floor."

"Whereabouts?"

"I don't remember. I saw it when I was leaving the room. I called the dog after me, and he came with his tail a hanging and his eyes looking as pitiful as if he was agoing to cry, you would have said. I went to Mrs. Cripps and told her to have him tied up, and not to say anything about the reason to the servants."

"And what did you do with the keys and the handkerchief?"

"I took them to Sir Philip, of course."

"Did he say anything when you gave them to him?"

"Yes, he said I needn't have brought them for he was going back to the library. He had only come up to his room for a paper, and was going down again. I suppose he was angry at me for taking the liberty of touching his papers."

"Oh, he was angry, was he? What did he say?"

"It wasn't so much what he said as the way he looked."

"How did he look?"

"Well, though he is my master, I can't deny the truth. He looked more like a devil than a man!"

Before starting back to London that night Fricker paid a second visit to Woodbine Cottage. The small household had retired, but Arthur and his mother, though they were both in their rooms had not gone to bed.

There was little prospect of sleep for either of them for the overwhelming happiness Fricker's news had brought them.

Arthur, having first looked out of his window to see who the late visitor might be, went downstairs in answer to the detective's ring at the door bell.

"I just looked round to say, sir, that being interested in the case you might like to hear all about it. I am going to make my report to my chief to-morrow, and if you care to be present I can manage it."

"I should like to hear the case exceedingly. It is a murder, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is a murder, and a strange one. I will wire you the first thing to-morrow morning when and where to meet me."

"Very well, I will come."

In spite of the lateness of the hour at which Fricker reached London he hunted up the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, who, as luck would would have it, was still in his office at Scotland Yard.

"Good evening, Fricker," he said. "you have something to tell me—you have finished the Ravendale case?" with a look of keen inquiry.

"Yes, sir, I have finished the Ravendale case," the detective replied as quietly as if he were intimating that he had finished his dinner, instead of the most extraordinary case that had ever come under his notice.

"And whom have you proved to be the murderer of Sir Richard Ravendale?"

"I have finished the case, but I have proved nothing as yet. I leave that for the jury that will try it."

"Of course, of course; but you know who is guilty, and you want another warrant, eh?"

"Before the arrest is made I should like you to hear the case, sir."

"Against Mrs. Vance?"

"Against Mrs. Vance. Yes, sir," replied Fricker.

"I thought so from the first," remarked the chief with satisfaction. "Well, I will hear your case. When? Now if you like."

"A few hours won't make any difference, sir, as Mrs. Vance is well watched. I will come with my report to-morrow if you will name the hour. Not too early, if you please," he added, thinking that he must give Arthur Wyndham time to receive a telegram, and come up from Cheselden.

"Shall we say twelve o'clock? Will that suit you?"

"Twelve o'clock will suit me perfectly, sir," replied Fricker; "and, by the way, sir," he added, casually, "I should like Sir Philip Ravendale to be present."

The chief looked somewhat surprised.

"He was married a short time ago. Has he returned from his honeymoon?"

"He was only away for a few days, sir."

"I suppose you have a reason for wishing him to be here?"

Fricker did not answer.

"Very well then," said the chief. "At twelve o'clock I shall ask him to come here, and after hearing your report I suppose we may arrest Mrs. Vance."

"After that," said Fricker, laconically, "we shall arrest the murderer of Sir Richard Ravendale."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CASE AGAINST MRS. VANCE.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen," said Fricker, coming into the superintendent's office shortly after twelve o'clock on the following morning. "I had some business that kept me," which statement was perfectly true.

Fricker had had business, but it consisted of watching at a window that commanded a view of the entrance into the offices of the criminal investigation department, for the arrival of Sir Philip Ravendale.

Fricker was accompanied by "The Shadow," also by Arthur Wyndham and Norah Blake, who, suspecting that this invitation to Arthur into the precints of Scotland Yard—a place which she always associated with prisons—might be some trap, had insisted on accompanying her lover.

"You here?" Sir Philip said to her, as they came in.

"Yes, why not?" was the answer, spoken somewhat haughtily. "Arthur is here," which would have been a reason all-sufficient for her presence even in the pit of Acheron. Her place was by her lover's side, regardless of surroundings.

"I took the liberty of asking Mr. Wyndham to come and hear how the case stands, as some people accused him of the murder—unjustly, I'm happy to say."

At this intentional shaft Sir Philip frowned, but in an instant his suavity and composure had returned to him. He looked handsome as ever, if a little pale; he wore an air of gravity and preoccupation, which was excusable under the circumstances. Had he not come to listen to the charge against those who had wrought evil to his brother?

"Well, Mr. Fricker," began the superintendent. "If you are ready we are ready. I think you can begin at once—with Sir Philip's permission."

Sir Philip bowed, and Fricker took out a roll of closely-written foolscap and placed a chair for himself in such a position that he faced everyone in the room except Smith, who stood behind him and directly opposite Sir Philip.

"I have finished the case, sir," said the

detective, addressing his chief, "as far as it lies in my power to do so; but before taking any final step I think it is as well that you should hear how it stands, and I will refer it to your decision and that of Sir Richard Ravendale's family whether it is justifiable to arrest Mrs. Vance."

"You have not proof positive that she is guilty, then?" put in Sir Philip.

"I have not. There is a strong case against her, but it rests entirely on circumstantial evidence."

"Which has been found sufficient to convict before this, and will again," remarked Sir Philip.

"Which has, as you say, been found sufficient to convict," repeated Fricker, with a deferential bow, "and will be found sufficient again."

No one offering any further comment the detective commenced to read his report.

"Last August," he began, "Mrs. Mary Ann Vance, alias Read—indeed, Read is her name, Vance having been her maiden name—came to Chorlton, and took furnished rooms in the house of Mrs. Binks, 13, Market Street. On a certain day, soon after her arrival, she went for a walk and her steps took her in the direction of Cheselden—casually as might at first sight appear, intentionally as subsequent events go to prove. Passing the main entrance of Ravendale Hall she stepped up to the gateway and looked in through the ironwork. The gate-keeper's wife happened to be standing at the door of the lodge, and the stranger outside the gates opened a conversation by remarking on the beauty of the place. The lodge-keeper's wife being of a communicative turn of mind answered several questions put to her by the stranger relative to the Ravendale family. Whilst they were thus talking two figures appeared round the corner of a turning a few yards along the road—these figures were Miss Blake and Mr. Wyndham."

At these words a sudden wave of colour spread over Norah's face, that was somewhat pale from anxiety. She remembered well the circumstances of the walk that August day, and how she and her lover had been arm-in-arm when they emerged on the road in sight of the Ravendale gates.

Arthur Wyndham, indignant that Norah's name should be introduced, was about to object to the detective's reminiscences when Norah herself broke in with,—

"I remember perfectly the woman standing by the gate, and was that"—in a horrified tone"—was that my guardian's murderer?"

"That was Mrs. Vance," replied Fricker. "She inquired who Miss Blake and Mr. Wyndham might be, and then she went on further and asked if there might be a vacancy for a servant at Ravendale Hall. It chanced that an under-housemaid was wanted. Here was Mrs. Vance's opportunity! To cut a long story short she managed to obtain the situation for her daughter Priscilla, who left her situation in Grosvenor-square in order to come to Ravendale Hall, where she was not only under-housemaid, but——" Fricker paused.

"What?" asked the superintendent.

"A spy in the Ravendale household."

Sir Philip took out a white silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Yes, a spy," repeated Fricker. "There is no other way of explaining the extraordinary interest the girl took in the family affairs, no other reason for her playing eavesdropper at an interview that took place on the day before Sir Philip left Ravendale Hall."

"To what interview do you refer?" inquired Sir Philip, quickly.

"To the interview you had with Miss Blake. I am sorry to be obliged to mention the young lady's name again, but I cannot avoid it in connection with Priscilla Vance. The girl's whole object in life, whilst she was at Ravendale Hall, seemed to be to find out whom Miss Blake was likely to marry. I need not mention the subject of that interview; it has no direct bearing on the case."

"You know it then?" queried Sir Philip, whilst Nora Blake's clear grey eyes drooped with shame.

"Certainly I know it. It was my business to find out everything about the Vances—everything," and Fricker looked straight at Sir Philip, who in his turn dropped his eyes. This omniscient detective made him feel uncomfortable. "That brings us very near the date of the murder," went on Fricker, resuming his reading. "Sir Philip left Ravendale Hall on the thirtieth of January. Meantime, what of Mrs. Vance? At first, during her sojourn in Chorlton, she was in comfortable circumstances—according to Mrs. Binks—that is to say she paid her rent regularly, and was able to buy all she required.

"After Christmas, however, there was a change in her circumstances: she fell into arrears, and poverty threatened. At length, when things became unbearable, she took the step which has laid her under the suspicion of having caused the death of Sir Richard Ravendale. She was possessed of a secret concerning the Ravendale family—a secret which I need not mention at present—and she determined to recoup her finances by selling this secret to Sir Richard."

During these statements Sir Philip sat apparently wholly unmoved; there was even a smile on his handsome, dark face—a smile of defiance. Was he not ready to refute any statement made against him? Had he not taken the precaution to go to Mereham for his honeymoon? He had girded on his armour before the danger threatened, and was safe—safe in his inheritance.

"Monday, the second of February, was the day she selected to make her market," pursued Fricker. "She reached Ravendale Hall at about six o'clock. All this I have on her own confession. She entered the grounds by the small gate near Woodbine Cottage, meeting, on her way to the house, Mr. Arthur Wyndham, who is thus proved to have told the truth when he declared that he left Sir Richard previous to a quarter after six," here Norah Blake laid her hand on Arthur's arm, and a glad look of relief lit up her face.

"At the inquest James, the footman, made a statement which was the main cause of suspicion being directed to Mr. Wyndham. He said he heard voices in the library at half-past six, and, as there was no one to prove that Mr. Wyndham had left the house by that time, it was presumed that one of those voices belonged to Mr. Wyndham. It is now proved that the voice was not Mr. Wyndham's, but Mrs. Vance's. She had been admitted into the house by Priscilla, her daughter, who had absented herself from the servants' hall on pretext of a headache, on purpose to assist her mother to this interview with Sir Richard. There is no witness as to what passed between Sir Richard and Mrs. Vance, excepting Mrs. Vance herself. Her story is that Sir Richard was so startled by the secret she imparted to him, that he fell down before her eyes in what she supposed to be a swoon, and not wishing to have her visit known, she made her escape by the window, which was afterwards found open by Albert Hirsh, the valet, who first discovered the body.

"Whether this statement is true or not can only be determined by subsequent occurrences. I will pass over that part of the case which deals with the finding of the body, and Dr. Parr's declaration that Sir Richard had succumbed to cardiac weakness. I will only make mention of Priscilla's conduct. When Mary, the housemaid, brought her the news of the death, what did she say?

"'Who murdered him?' Those were her words, and those words, taken in conjunction with her knowledge of her mother's visit, point to the terrible, but undeniable, conclusion that the girl believed her own mother guilty of crime, or at least capable of committing crime. Again, on the Thursday evening, she gave further evidence of that same belief; for the instant the whisper of foul play made itself heard in the terrified and excited household, she went to Mrs. Cripps, the housekeeper, with a cock-and-bull story about her mother being dangerously ill, and asked permission to go to her.

"What the daughter said to the mother at that first meeting, after her suspicions had been changed into certainty no one knows; Mrs. Binks heard her sobbing, and we may infer that she accused her mother to her face with having committed the murder, and entreated her to fly while there was yet time. Part of a conversation overheard by Mrs. Binks justifies this inference.

"Priscilla begged of her mother not to wait to pack up her belongings when such delay might mean life or death. Mrs. Binks thought the words referred to a sister of Mrs. Vance's—a fictitious sister—on account of the illness of whom Mrs. Vance had saddled the reason for her sudden departure.

"Mrs. Vance's reply to Priscilla's entreaty was pregnant with meaning. 'May Heaven forgive you, Priscilla, for thinking this of your own mother!' was all she said.

"That night the Vances left Chorlton, and disappeared for awhile in the wilderness of London; but only for awhile. Some three weeks ago I came to a knowledge of their whereabouts. They were living in quiet concealment at No. 6, Islington-crescent, under the name of Read. Priscilla having taken the Christian name of Ellen, as an alias for her own somewhat more uncommon and somewhat too well-known one.

"Since their discovery they have been shadowed night and day, and Priscilla has been repeatedly heard to accuse her mother with the guilt of murder. Such is the case against Mrs. Vance—a strong one I think. Should Mrs. Vance be arrested on such circumstantial evidence as there is, the defence will of course be that Sir Richard died, not by foul play, but from heart disease,—a point which medical evidence has hitherto not set at rest. But, I ask, is it possible for anyone having any insight into human actions, to believe that the Vances would have acted in this underhand way, had they not been somehow implicated in the event which has given to Sir Philip Ravendale his inheritance?"

At this carefully dealt blow, unnoticed by all but himself, Sir Philip moved uneasily in his chair.

Fricker went on reading.

"Priscilla's actions are even more suggestive of such implication than are her mother's. I do not believe that she had any hand in the crime, but she had certainly some knowledge of the hand by which it was done, or of the motive which led to its committal. That she possessed that knowledge is proved, I think, by her disappearance from Ravendale Hall under false pretences, on the very day after the murder."

Fricker pausing, the superintendent spoke.

"Excuse me, Mr. Fricker, you have made a slight misstatement. You said the day after the murder."

"Yes, sir. I know I said the day after that is quite correct."

"But," protested the superintendent. "Priscilla Vance left Ravendale Hall on Thursday, the fifth of February, and the murder took place on Monday the second."

"The murder took place on Wednesday the fourth of February."

(To be continued.)

An insect as dangerous as that which is generated in pork exists in raw sugar. It is called acarus sacchari, in form resembles a flea, and is less than a hundredth of an inch long. Small as it is, it is capable of much mischief in the human body. It is never found in refined sugar, because it cannot pass through the charcoal filter, and if it could it would find no nitrogen on which to live. So do not eat raw sugar or raw pork.

NEARLY WRECKED.

(*Continued from page 201.*)

"Leave me a little while, I am not myself; but my strength will return to me, but now I must be alone."

And reluctantly Lois left her, more than half afraid of the result of her disclosure; but just when she began to grow very nervous Miss Rebecca's door opened, and Miss Rebecca herself spoke her name in tremulous tones.

"Heaven has taken all hardness from my heart, and restored my courage. I am going at once to—to my husband; and you, child, forgive me my long life of fraud. I was always a proud woman, and I could not bear the world to know of my folly and misery."

* * * * *

It was a very trembling old lady indeed who an hour later took her seat between nephew and niece in the London train; but she insisted upon hearing all they could tell, and when she learned that it was for her sake that Lois had endured her harsh judgment, had run such a risk of losing her lover, she fell upon her neck weeping unrestrainedly.

"I have not deserved such generosity from you and Harold. I never can repay you; through all the short years left to me now, I shall hate myself that I so nearly wrecked your lives!"

But they would let her say no more. Only throughout the journey they ministered lovingly to her comfort. And so at last they reached London, and, driving through the busy streets, came to the house where Richard Harefield lay breathing his last.

"Let me see him alone first," said Miss Rebecca, and they did not oppose her.

Entering very quietly, her dim eyes rested on the changed face of the man she had loved to her own destruction forty years ago. She had not seen him since they parted at the church door on that fatal wedding morning.

Now the sands of life were nearly run for both. She had been a handsome girl of twenty-two then: she was now an old woman whose life had been wholly ruined by this man.

But she thought nothing of this now. She only remembered she was his wife, and that he was repentant.

"Richard!" she said, brokenly, "Richard! you sent for me."

A thin hand went out entreatingly to her.

"For Heaven's sake forgive me. Let me die in peace. It is more than I deserve or should hope!"

She sank on her knees beside the bed, pressing her withered cheek to his, that was already so cold.

"I am too near the grave myself to cherish malice. If you had come to me when first you returned I should probably have met you with angry reproaches; but, Dick! oh, Dick! I remember now how dearly I loved you long ago! long ago! and the old love never died out. Let me stay with you to the end. It is my right."

"You're a good woman, Rebecca, and my best was always bad. I wonder if Heaven is as merciful as women to those they love."

Hand-in-hand again after many years; and the inexpressibly softened voice uttering words of comfort and encouragement was the voice of proud Rebecca Stanford.

Towards evening the last change came. By her own wish she alone was with him. As he tried feebly to whisper good-bye, she, stooping, kissed his clay-cold lips, and bowing herself a moment in prayer, rose and walked firmly to the door.

"It is over," she said, in a breathless way. "Thank Heaven I was with him at the last. I am a broken-down old woman. Take me home to die!"

The funeral was conducted as quickly as decency permitted, and then "Miss Rebecca," habited in deep mourning but wearing no weeds, returned home with "her children."

No one had ever known of her marriage save Lois and Harold. It was not necessary to proclaim it to the world now, that would only be to give her additional pain.

So it was given out that she had lost a near relative, and to the end of her days she would be known as Miss Rebecca, and surely the deception was an innocent one, and only Charity did not quite believe in the story of the near relative.

* * * *

All this happened four years ago; but the shock and surprise of finding Richard Harefield still alive, of learning the depth of his villainy, did not kill Miss Rebecca.

She was much aged, but at the same time she was much softened, so that the lovable side of her character was presented to the little ones who began to make such music in the lovely home.

To them she was granny, the dearest granny in all the world, and happier perhaps than ever she had been even in her youth.

Granny had been playing with the children until she was tired, and like her they had gone into the house, for the sweet dusk of a divine April night was fast falling. But Lois remained in the garden with Harold.

"Oh!" she sighed, "what a happy, happy woman I am. There is nothing but gladness in my life."

"So after all, sweetheart, you do not regret giving yourself to a Harefield."

"No; oh, no! I thank Heaven every day for my husband's love," she answered, with shining eyes.

"And perhaps we each hold our happiness the more precious because it was so NEARLY WRECKED!"

[THE END.]

RIVAL TENANTS.

—o—

"YES," said old Mrs. Brett, nodding her orange-coloured cap-strings, "they put me in—the owners did—to take care of the house; with a big painted

TO LET.

stuck up in front of the area-windows, and coal and house-rent free. Which I don't deny, my dear, is an object to a lone female like me, with neither chick nor child, and my own way to make in the world, with fine laundressing out of the question, on account of rheumatism in the finger-joints. 'You seem like a respectable person, Mrs. Brett, that has seen better days,' was what the house-agent said, when he handed over the keys, 'and,' says he, 'I think we may trust you to take good care of our doorsteps and windows, show applicants over the house, and answer all questions.' 'You may say so, sir,' says I, with a courtesy; 'there's many houses I've had charge of, and never a fault has been found yet. And this sha'n't be the first one,' says I. 'We've a large business,' says Mr. Jones, 'and if you give satisfaction, Mrs. Brett,' says he, as civil spoken as possible, 'it's likely you'll never be without a roof to your head!'

"Well, my dear, of all nice houses—and I've seen a-many in my day—this was the nicest. Brown-stone front, with a bay-window and a snug garden planted all in box-borders, hot and cold water all through, a little conservatory with an arched glass roof at the rear, and the hall floor covered with real Minton tiles, as make you think you was walking on pictures; walls painted in Cupids and Venuses and garlands of flowers, and dados of hard wood all through. Neighbourhood most desirable; drainage and sewerage perfect, and churches conveniently near. Excuse me, my dear, if it sounds like an advertisement, but Mr. Jones, the agent, wrote it down for me, and I never rested until I'd commited it all to memory, so I could speak it off, easy like, without any stops or hitches. And this I will say, as can't be said of all advertisements, there wasn't a word in the description but what the house bore out!

"And the board hadn't been up twenty-four hours before there was a rush to look at the house. Young married couples as wanted to leave off boarding; old married folks as wasn't suited with their location; boarding-house keepers as made believe they was private families; and private families as wanted to take a few select boarders. But the rent was put up tolerably high, and most of 'em dropped off, after I'd named the sum.

"'Never mind, Mrs. Brett—never mind,' says Mr. Jones, rubbing his hand. 'It's a house that there'll be no difficulty in letting, without any reduction of rent. Just wait,' says he, 'until the spring sets in.'

"But, one day, in trots an old gentleman, with gold spectacles, and a smooth shaven face and 'business' writ in every wrinkle of his forehead.

"'This house to let, ma'am?' says he.

"'Yes, sir,' says I.

"'Can I look at it?' says he.

"'Certainly sir,' says I. I began, as smooth as oil, about the hot and cold water, the marble-floored bath-room, and the Minton tiles, when, all of a sudden, he put up two hands in a warning sort of way.

"'That 'll do, ma'am,' says he, 'that'll do. I've eyes and I can see for myself.'

"'Certainly sir,' says I; but I won't deny as I was took aback by that queer dictatorial way of his.

"'Any ghosts about the place, ma'am?' says he.

"'Sir?' says I.

"'Ghosts,' says he, out loud and sharp. 'Mysterious footsteps—lurking shadows—clanking chains at midnight?'

"'Mercy, no, sir,' says I, beginning to feel my flesh creep all over.

"'Rats?' says he.

"'Certainly not,' says I—'with solid cemented cellar floor and sealed boards.'

"'Beetles?' says he.

"Look for yourself, sir,' says I, bridling up a little.

"'I like the house,' says he, after he had gone sniffing about the drain-pipes, and peered into the coal-cellar and wine-vault and sounded the copper boiler with his knuckles, just for all the world as if he was in the plumbing business. You may tell the owner I'll take it, if he and I can come to terms about the rent. When shall you see him?'

"'Most likely this afternoon, sir,' says I.

"'I'll drop in at his office to-morrow, at nine,' says he. 'I'm going to be married,' says he, as composed as if he were saying that he was going to take a blue pill. 'And the house will suit my wife's ideas. She thinks we're going into lodgings,' says he, with an odd sort of chuckle in his throat, 'and she's not a bit pleased with the idea. It'll be a pleasant surprise for her,' says he.

"Well, no sooner had he gone than in comes a stout, middle-aged lady, in a black silk dress, rows of curls on either side of her face, and cheeks as red as any cabbage-rose.

"'I've just come from Mr. Jones' office,' says she. 'He has given me the refusal of this house in case it suits me.'

"'I don't know, ma'am.' says I, 'but what it's let already.'

"'Let already?' says she, with a sort of scream. 'But that's impossible! Don't I tell you I've the refusal of it? Show me the premises at once.'

"Well, I was in a pretty puzzle, as you may believe; but I went all over the house with

the curly lady, and she declared it met her fancy exactly.

"'Possession on the first of May, I suppose?'" says she.

"'Yes, ma'am,' says I, 'if——'

"'There's no "if" in the question,' says she, as short as pie-crust. 'You may take down the "To Let," my good woman.'

"I courtesys very low, but I says to myself: 'Not if I knows it, ma'am, without orders from the gentleman himself.'

"Away went the lady with the curly hair and the rose-red cheeks, and I was just putting on my hat to run around to the house agency, when in comes Mr. Jones, all smiles.

"'Well, Mrs. Brett,' says he, 'so the house is let?'

"'To my thinking, sir,' says I, 'it's let twice over.'

"And I up and told him about my old gentleman.

"'Dear me,' says he, 'this is very perplexing. At what time was this personage here?'

"'The clock struck twelve, sir,' says I, 'just as he went away.'

"Mr. Jones hit himself a blow over the forehead like a play-actor.

"'Confusion worse confounded!' says he. 'It was twelve, precisely, when my customer left the office. We can't split the house in two, can we?' says he. 'Well, we must tell your old gentleman just how it happened. I daresay he'll be reasonable about it.'

"But he wasn't reasonable, Mr. Jones told me afterwards; he never saw anyone in such a rage.

"'I've taken the house,' says he, 'and I'll have it, cost what it may. Do you say that the rent is fifty pounds? I'll give you seventy down; if my claim and that of this lady is equally good, the question of price must settle it.'

"Well, we supposed—me and Mr. Jones—as that was an end of the matter. But not a bit of it. The lady came that same afternoon with an upholsterer and a tape-measure to see about the carpets.

"'Seventy pounds, indeed!' says she, with a toss of her curls. 'It will take more than a paltry seventy pounds to unsettle my plans. I'll give eighty sooner than lose the house!'

"When my old gentleman hears this, he grinds his teeth in a manner as was fearful to hear.

"'It's my house,' says he, 'and I will have it! Ninety pounds, Jones!'

"'Come,' says Mr. Jones, 'matters are getting lively. Real estate is looking up in the market,' says he.

"But you should have heard what a whistle he gave when I told him, the very next day, that the curly lady had authorised me to offer a hundred pounds.

"'I'll not stand this any longer,' says Mr. Jones, jumping up and sending the papers flying all over his office table. 'I've a conscience, if Fate has made an estate owner of me. Tell her to come around this afternoon and sign the lease. One hundred pounds is twice what we asked, and we asked all the property was worth to begin with.'

"So the curly lady had her own way, after all.

"The bald-headed old gentleman stamped around in a pretty rage when he heard as the house was let.

"'I'll sue the owners,' says he. 'I'll have the house if it costs me all I'm worth!'

"'Oh, hush, sir, hush!' says I, all in a tremble. 'Here comes Miss Lock now!'

"'Who?' says he.

"'Miss Lock,' says I. 'The lady as has taken the house!'

"And I got behind the door, fully expecting a scene, after all that had come and gone. But, to my surprise, she gave a little shriek, and flew into his arms.

"'Dear Jem!' says she.

"'Dearest Martha!' says he.

"'How on earth came you here?' says she.

"'I was looking for a desirable residence for you, my own angel,' says he.

"'You duck!' says she.

"'And I thought this would exactly suit you,' says he.

"'Oh!' says she, 'it does. And I've taken it at a hundred pounds a-year. It seems a good deal of money to pay, but I've been driven to it by a horrid old cormorant who was determined to have the house at any price! However——'

"'Martha,' says the old gentleman, with a little gasping sound in his throat, as if he was swallowing a lump, 'that cormorant was I!'

"'You don't mean——' says she.

"'That we've been bidding against each other,' says the old gentleman. 'Yes, we have.'

"'And I was going to give you such a pleasant surprise,' says she, pulling out her pocket-handkerchief.

"'It is a surprise,' says he. 'But as for the pleasure of it—— Never mind, Martha. Let's go in and measure for the carpets and curtains. Let bygones be bygones—but the next time we drive a bargain, perhaps it might be as well to confide in each other. A hundred pounds a-year—on a five years' lease—is almost too much to pay for a pleasant surprise!'

"So that settled the matter, my dear," said old Mrs. Brett. "They were married in a month, and came there to live. And of all my experience in house-letting, this beat everything—and so everybody says, my dear, as hears the story. Another cup of tea? Nor a muffin? Then I'll put on my things so as to be ready for evening church, for the bells are ringing," said Mrs. Brett, "and I never like to be late!"

FACETIÆ.

The drum major puts on more airs than any brass band can play.

A woman sometimes forgets that she has an immortal soul, but she never forgets that she has a complexion.

A young woman who lost her speech by a severe cold, had twenty offers of marriage in one week.

"Did the older brother give the bride away?" "Yes; but the little one threatened to if his supply of cake ran short."

Awkward for Pa.—Little Innocent: "Oh, mamma! Look! The monkey knows papa and wants to shake hands with him!"

The Greatest Lottery.—"Did you ever take part in a game of chance, Mr. Batton?" "Well, I'm married, you know."

It is easy for the small boy to "make a clean breast of it," but the rub comes when you want him to wash his neck.

A grocer advertised that he had the same kind of apples for sale that Eve ate, and next day his house was crowded with women.

There is only a distinction without a difference between an auburn-haired sweetheart and a red-headed wife.

The times when it is not advisable to tell the truth are also the times when it is not advisable to tell anything.

There are people who think if they stand on the river bank and throw a straw to a drowning man they have done enough.

There is a whistling buoy anchored off Block Island. Oh, that all the whistling boys could be anchored in deep water, far away.

There are some pretended Christians who would frighten us from the joys of this world in order to have them all to themselves.

Valuable Information.—"I tell you, Trivvet," said Scadds, "money is trouble." "I'm glad you told me," replied Trivvet. "I had no idea I was so wealthy."

"None but the brave deserve the fair," and a poor young man with a very fair sweetheart must needs be brave if he would not get left.

Still there.—"There's gas escaping," said Bunfing, sniffing the air. "No," replied Larkin, also taking a sniff; "it seems to be here yet."

Marie: "Why, Ethel, what is the matter with Fido?" Ethel: "Isn't it too bad? I gave him to the laundress to wash, and she starched him."

"How is it that you write only one-act plays?" "So that no critic can say 'The second act was unnecessary, and the third act could have been left out altogether.'"

Fussy: "Sir, the howling of your dog annoys me dreadfully." McGuff: "It do, do it? Maybe yez wanted me to get a trained baste that can play on the flute."

Loss of sleep, it is said, is making men small and puny. That is a fact. Just look at the difference in the physique of a delicate scholar and the robust night policeman.

It is wise for a young man to embrace all of his opportunities; but he should remember that another fellow's girl is not his opportunity.

"How does the new girl strike you?" asked a citizen at dinner lately. "She hasn't struck me yet," answered his wife, meekly, "but she has done almost everything else."

Young Wife: "I took great pains with that cucumber salad, John, and I hope you enjoyed it." Husband (anxiously): "I am afraid, my dear, that I took great pains with it, too."

Johnny: "Where are you goin'?" Tommy: "Home, ma's a-calling me." Johnny: "She called you two or three times before." Tommy: "Yes, but she's brought out a cane now."

"Your marriage was the result of love at first sight, wasn't it?" "Yes," replied the near-sighted friend. "I never shall forget that day. Only time in my life I was ever known to forget my glasses."

A Natural Consequence.—"Now," said the physician, "you will have to eat plain food and not stay out late at night." "Yes," said the patient; "that is what I have been thinking ever since you sent in your bill."

In a "What is a kiss, anyway?" contest the prize was awarded to a woman who wrote as follows: "A kiss is an insipid and tasteless morsel that becomes delicious and delectable in proportion as it is flavoured with love."

"You are another poor victim of circumstances," said the charitable housekeeper. "No ma'am," replied Mr. Hungry Higgins, proudly. "I ain't. I'm a self-made man, I am, even if it ain't much of a job."

Employer: "John, what do you mean by sitting there doing nothing for the last half hour? I can't have you wasting your time in that way?" John: "Beg pardon, sir, but it isn't my time I'm wasting. It's some of yours."

Husband: "You have changed washerwomen, I see." Wife: "Yes. How do you know?" Husband: "Instead of getting Brown, Jones, and Robinson's shirts, I'm getting some strange garments I never wore before."

A newspaper man, evidently an expert, says: "Do not swear. There is no occasion to swear outside of a printing office. It is useful in proof reading; it is indispensable in getting formes to press, and has been known to assist in looking over the paper after it is printed; but otherwise it is a very disgusting habit."

"Mamma," said Johnnie, "can anybody hear with their mouth?" "No, child, I don't think they can," replied the mother. "Then, mamma, what made Mr. Jones tell sister he wanted to tell her something, and put his lips to her mouth instead of her ears?" The mother didn't question Johnnie, but turned her attention to Mr Jones, but that worthy gentleman made it all right by proper explanations.

SOCIETY.

The King of Greece speaks twelve languages.

Queen Victoria believes that articles made by blind people bring luck.

Prince George looks quite in his usual health now, and his parents have ceased to feel the great anxiety about him which troubled them for weeks after their common sorrow. Princess Maud is the only member of the family who looks still very pale and ill.

The German Emperor's eccentricities are causing increased alarm among his subjects. The *train de luxe* is not popular, but the idea of beautifying the Potsdam Palace by means of a lottery is regarded as a project only worthy of the late King of Bavaria.

The programme of public functions before Princess Christian for this season is a formidable one, but one which her Royal Highness will carry through with her usual brightness, amiability, and cheerfulness. Princess Christian shares with the Prince of Wales the power of doing such things as though it were the great interest and pleasure of her life.

Although the Duke and Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha insisted strongly on their golden wedding being regarded as a purely private and domestic event, their loyal subjects have quietly subscribed enough to endow a hospital and almshouse at Gotha in commemoration of the anniversary. The fact was communicated to the Duke and Duchess in a letter which touched them greatly.

The Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria is distinguishing himself by his prowess as an engine-driver, while his uncle is winning fame as an oculist at Meran. The heir to the Austrian throne lately drove the express train from Wiener Neustadt to Gloggnitz, and arrived with praiseworthy punctuality.

The Prince Consort was told, when a child of three years old, by his nurse that he should marry an English Mayblossom—the little Princess Victoria. And when Albert first thought of marrying at all, he always thought of her, but was very jealous of Prince George of Cambridge.

The Winter Palace, where the Czar has been staying during the Czarina's absence in the Crimea, is, with the exception of Versailles and the Vatican, the largest residential palace in the world; and though it is odd and tasteless in style, it derives a certain amount of grandeur from its immense size. The Royal entertainments at the Winter Palace are celebrated for their magnificence, and for the lavish extravagance with which they are carried out. Places are often laid for four or five hundred guests.

The German Crown Prince, who, on completing his tenth year, was ceremoniously inducted into the army through the First Foot Guards at Potsdam, is a very bright and pretty little boy, and promises to become a fine man. The Hohenzollern race has decidedly improved, both in health and beauty, under the auspices of the present Empress, and it would be difficult to find anywhere a bonnier and brighter set of youngsters, half a dozen in number, who encircle the Imperial throne.

The Pope, at the age of eighty-two, uses glasses only when reading. At seventy he could see better than at twenty, as in his younger days he was very near-sighted.

Veils are the passion of the hour in Paris. Every shop window is gay with them, and every woman has a large and interesting collection. Each style of hat has its appropriate veil; and wearers are just beginning to realise how much difference this dainty adjunct can make in their appearance.

STATISTICS.

Japan has no fewer than 700 earthquake observing stations scattered over the empire.

To be perfectly proportioned, a man should weigh 28lb. for every foot of his height.

It takes eight times the strength to go upstairs that is required to walk the same distance on a level.

Twelve thousand pictures were sent to the Royal Academy for exhibition this year. Ten or twelve years ago the numbers were from 4,000 to 5,000 only.

The sun gives six hundred thousand times as much light as the moon; seven thousand million as much as the brightest star, and thirty-six million as much as all the stars combined. In size the sun equals one million three hundred thousand earths, but, owing to its smaller density, its weight equals only three hundred thousand earths.

GEMS.

You can't learn too much, but you can half learn too much.

The plant of happiness cannot thrive without the air of cheerfulness.

A prayer, in its simplest definition, is merely a wish turned heavenward.

Suffering becomes beautiful when any one bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility, but through greatness of mind.

How much trouble he avoids who does not look to see what his neighbour says or does or thinks, but only to what he does himself, that it may be just and pure.

Take the ordinary, everyday race of men and women—which of the two endures, sacrifices, and loves on, freely and fully, to the end? In ninety-nine cases out of one hundred it is the woman—the timid, nervous, cowardly woman.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

Soufflés Tarts.—Line fatty pans with puff paste, then put a little jam in the bottom, next beat up the whites of three eggs with three ounces of sugar for a quarter of an hour, spread this on the top of the jam smoothly, and put in a slow oven to bake till ready.

Norfolk Syllabub.—Take a pint of raw cream, and throw in a sufficient number of lumps of sugar to sweeten the whole, half a pint of green ginger wine and the peel of one lemon with the juice of two. Whisk until thick, and pour into custard glasses. A teaspoonful of Cognac should be added to each glass.

Yankee Cake.—One and half tea-cups sugar, three tea-cups flour, one tea-cup butter-milk, one tablespoon butter, one teaspoon baking-soda, one teaspoon ground cinnamon, half teaspoon grated nutmeg, half pound raisins—mix butter and sugar together, then add flour, soda, and spices; then add the milk, and mix well; put into a greased cake tin and bake about three-quarters of an hour till ready.

A Nutritious Drink for Invalids.—A drink especially adapted for invalids is made by cutting four lemons into halves, squeezing the juice into three pints of boiling water, then taking half a pound of lump sugar and rubbing the peel until the sugar is yellow, so as to get at the essential oil of the peel. Pour the whole into a jug, cover it, let it cool and strain. Cracked ice may be stirred into a tumbler a few minutes before drinking. When the patient is recovering, it is well to add the white of an egg and then froth up. When so prepared this makes a most nutritious drink, particularly soothing in cases of fever and bowel complaints in children.

MISCELLANEOUS.

A new medicine just discovered is called isobutylorthocresoliodide.

It is said that the whole of the Vatican will shortly be lit by electricity.

Pupils in the schools of Japan are taken out rabbit-hunting one day in every autumn.

A celebrated French chef is said to have the art of serving eggs five hundred different styles.

In Cuba a continuous light, adequate for reading purposes, is obtained from a dozen fireflies confined in a cage.

An angel's beauty is ideal. Should an anatomist draw one with the muscles necessary to move both arms and wings, we should see a queer figure.

The ants have their great personages as well as the human race. These little insects go under commanders, and it is well known that bee colonies have their queens.

In proportion to population Switzerland has a larger army than any other European nation. Every citizen of the land has at some time been under military training, and is ready for service.

There is a veritable Gretna Green in Indiana—the little town of Shoals—where a blacksmith, who is also a magistrate, performs the marriage ceremony for couples from a distance in truly romantic fashion.

The custom of kissing hands as a mark of respect is said to be the most ancient and most universal. From the remotest times, through the ages of Greece and Rome to the present day, it has existed.

It is not generally known that an orange hit in the exact centre by a rifle ball will vanish at once from sight. Such, however, is the fact, and shooting it through the centre scatters it in such infinitesimal pieces that it is at once lost from sight.

To insure durability, wood pavements must be laid with great care, and have a concrete foundation made of the best materials. Those that have been laid in Paris have stood about seven or eight years under heavy traffic, and about fifteen under moderate.

It is quite easy for a child to learn to write with the left hand, and, although after the muscles have got set with age it is more difficult, almost any man can learn to write with his left hand in a week, and to write about as well with one hand as the other in less than a year.

The perpendicularity of a monument is, although few may be aware of it, visibly affected by the rays of the sun. On every sunny day a tall monument has a regular swing leaning away from the sun. This phenomenon is due to the greater expansion of the side on which the rays of the sun fall.

There was once a postmistress-general, not in this country, but in Denmark. Her name was Countess Gyldenlore, or Dorothea Krag, as she was called during her term of office, which extended from 1703 to 1711. The present postal system of Denmark, which is considered one of the best in the world, was introduced by her.

Japanese auctions are conducted upon a plan which gives rise to none of the noise and confusion which commonly attend such sales. Each bidder writes his name and bid upon a slip of paper, which he places in a box. When the bidding is over, the box is opened by the auctioneer, and the goods declared the property of the highest bidder.

When Landseer's "Monarch of the Glen" was originally offered to the House of Commons, to adorn the dining-room of "the best Club in London," the Committee refused it on the ground that the price asked, £400, was excessive. It was sold lately at Christie's as an item in the famous Cheylesmore collection, for £6,900!

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

RIDLEY.—We cannot advise you in such a matter.

T. B.—The average weight of a man's brain is 49½ oz.

E. P.—Inquire at the Inland Revenue Office.

MINCE (Sydenham).—We hardly understand your question. All fruits have more or less acid in them.

TOM BOWLING.—A pound Scots was worth 1s. 8d. sterling.

KING COLE.—The Government won't commute a pension for the United States.

FAITHFUL.—Not another leap year till 1896, then not again till 1904.

A. B. C.—The "chain" is 66 feet; divided into poles of 5½ yards, and yards of 3 feet.

W. F. P.—Yes, you must have a pedlar's license, costing 5l., from police.

SAUL.—For climbing, rowing or athletics, a flannel shirt or a fine jersey is usually worn.

MARIGOLD.—Rent owing by a lodger can be sued for in the county court.

LENDER.—If the loan can be proved the money can be recovered.

INQUIRER.—£1 and £2 notes were issued by the Bank of England in March, 1797.

FORTUNATUS.—A woman is legally of age on reaching the age of twenty-one years.

INDIGNATION.—If you can prove misrepresentation or fraud you can sue for damages.

MEG.—One ounce of salt to each 3 lbs. of butter is a fair proportion to use in salting fresh butter.

A LOVER OF DOGS.—The railway dog "Help" was, we believe, accidentally killed some time ago.

IN DISPUTE.—The town is pronounced as spelt, Derby; the title is pronounced as if spelt "Darby."

L. B.—Being discharged from India by purchase forfeits all claim against the home Government.

N. B.—The four leading ports in the United Kingdom are London, Liverpool, Cardiff, and Glasgow.

PETER.—Can't tell. May be constitutional or hereditary, may be poverty of blood, or may be indigestion.

G. L.—All branches; general education. Shorthand a secondary matter, but not less than 80 words.

REGULAR READER.—We have no further information than that given in the paragraph to which you refer.

EFFIE.—According to Webster, "Effie" is the diminutive of "Euphemia," and means "of good report."

AURORA.—We are unaware of anything historical giving women the privilege of proposal in leap year.

MABEL.—It is difficult, among the many good conservatories of music, to say what one is the best.

ANXIOUS JENNY.—The 2nd Battalion Royal Scottish Fusiliers are still at Peshawur, and there is no suggestion of their return meanwhile.

LIONEL.—A "provisional protection" gives you the first right to patent the article in question within the prescribed time.

M. A.—There is no reliable machine in the market at such a price. An article of doubtful utility is advertised in some of the London story and comic papers.

ONE IN DEBT.—If anything has been paid on account, or the debt has been in any way acknowledged within six years, the money can be recovered.

DORA.—Every person, whether in business or otherwise, is liable to pay income-tax on an income averaging £150 at least during the past three years.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS.—1. "Rhys" is usually pronounced as if spelt "rice." 2. The usual toasts at a wedding breakfast are "The Bride" and "The Bridesmaids."

N. O.—No; a dairyman is not exempt from dog-tax; neither is a grazier or cattle-salesman. Only farmers and shepherds.

Z. Y. X.—Your best course is to go straight to the Labour Bureau at New York and ascertain there where men in your line are wanted at the time of your arrival.

LAURIE.—The pawnbrokers' sign—the three gold balls—is supposed to come from the arms of the corporation of Lombards in the Middle Ages.

AIRY FAIRY LILIAN.—Wash the hair occasionally with water containing a little borax, that will keep it soft and silky.

"THANE OF FIFE."—Fife is a name from locality, but what it means no one can tell you. Its origin is quite unknown.

SWIMMER.—Captain Webb entered the rapids below Niagara. He did not go over the falls. No man could do that and live.

T. R.—The fighting strength of the German army is estimated at 2,384,631; of Italy, 2,844,329; and of Russia, 2,589,496.

BEE.—Beatrice is pronounced, according to the common pronunciation, as if spelled "*Bee* ah-triss," but the Italian pronunciation is "Bay-ah-*tree*-chay."

TITANIA.—The growth of the hair may, it is said, be stimulated by moistening the roots with strong sage-tea, made slightly sweet with glycerine.

PERPLEXITY.—There is a hamlet of Evington in East Gloucestershire, and there is a parish of Evington in Leicestershire, about three miles from Leicester.

R. O.—A raw apple is recommended as a relief at night and morning for internal disorders due to excessive pipe or cigar smoking.

A MINOR.—If the facts are as you state, you, being under age, cannot be held legally liable for any further payment.

L. S.—1. You will require a plate license if you sell gold articles of above the weight of 2 dwt., or silver articles above the weight of 5 dwt. 2. No.

T. L.—In taking an unfurnished house there is no implied warranty that it is reasonably fit for habitation, and the tenant is liable for the rent until he has legally terminated his tenancy.

MORYSTEUS.—A salt bath taken at night, at the temperature of eighty to eighty-five degrees, will often induce a pleasant sleep when nothing else will. The best salt for this purpose is rock-salt.

CASCA.—General Sir John Moore was born in Glasgow. His father, a doctor and author of repute, was a native of Stirling, where his father (the General's grandfather) was a minister.

SIMON.—How can we possibly tell what it will cost to maintain the lad? All lads are not alike. Some can manage to scrape through and maintain vigour on 6s. weekly; others cannot do as much on less than 12s.

CIVILIAN.—There are now only two regiments of heavy cavalry, the 1st and 2nd Dragoons (Scots Greys), 5 feet 8 to 11 inches; the 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards, recently heavies, have now been included in the medium list.

SWEET SIXTEEN.

I am taller far than Bess,
Though she's stouter, I confess,
And my shoe tops meet my dress,
And my hair
Reaches far below my waist,
Which is just a little laced,
And quite many who have taste
Call me fair.

With the boys I mustn't play,
Mamma told me so to-day;
And my dolls are given away,
Every one;
I'm too old to run about,
Play at tag, or laugh and shout;
I must learn to live without
Any fun.

If with Cousin Tom I walk,
Mamma sees me like a hawk,
And you ought to hear her talk!
Such a tongue!
"You a school-girl flirting, fie!"
Then I wish that I might die,
Since for any pleasure I
Am too young.

I'm too old to play with toys,
I'm too young for woman's joys,
I'm too old to fight the boys;
And the men
I'm forbidden to regard,
Lest I sister Bess retard,
And I find it rather hard
Now and then.

THE MISSING LINK.—To find the relative distance of the sun and stars, suppose the earth and sun but one inch apart. At the same relative distance the nearest fixed star would be just eleven miles away.

WRATHFUL.—If it can be shown that your dog was not under proper control you may be liable; but it is quite a question for the county court judge. You might possibly prosecute for cruelty the person who beat your dog.

T. M. P.—The celebrated *Alabama* was launched on the Mersey, and was taken out to sea before she had either proper crew or armament on board. She was never thereafter in any British port, or she would at once have been detained.

PROUD MOTHER.—Let him write to Secretary, Civil Service Commission, Cannon Row, Westminster, S.W., for form showing subjects of examination for boy clerkships and date of next competition. That is sent gratuitously.

B. C. D.—The only way to test the stability of a building society is to carefully study its balance-sheets, and investigate as far as possible the character of its investments. The position of the directors should also be taken into account.

JACK.—You must register your label as a trade-mark or design, by getting necessary form for 5s. through money-order office, filling up as required, and sending with copy of label to Trade-Marks Branch, Patent Office, 25, Southampton Buildings, London.

BAKER.—The law requires you to sell bread by weight, and a "quartern" loaf must weigh 4 lb. But you may legally sell a 1 lb. loaf, or a 1½ lb. loaf, or any weight you please, provided your customer knows what he is buying.

FRECKLES.—We know of nothing that will remove freckles permanently, that is, so that upon exposure to the sun they will not return. They are a peculiarity of certain complexions, and are liable to appear at any time.

PRETTY PENELOPE.—If the lack of colour in the face is the result of delicate health, then out-of-door exercise, good food, plenty of sleep and a contented mind are the best remedies. If constitutional, there is no remedy which is infallible.

TRAVELLER.—Books are of little use. Lodgings taken under such guidance are just as likely to be unsuitable as not. You must see places in order to make satisfactory selection. You might if you liked stop at Mayence for a day and make inquiry there.

THEOLOGICAL.—Not aware of any passage in the New Testament which supports the idea of a State-aided Church. "Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's" intimated plainly enough that Christ himself regarded the Church as an institution in no sense allied to the State.

MAURICE.—The man who was released from prison on 18th March, 1879, in consequence of Charles Peace declaring that he committed the crime for which the other had innocently been condemned, was William Habron. Peace was hanged on 25th February preceding the release.

ONE IN DOUBT.—We really cannot tell you what to do with a tradesman who is so unreasonable as not to send in his bill when he is asked for it. You, of course, remain liable to him, or to his executors, for any debt you may have incurred, subject to the Statute of Limitations.

CUCKOO.—The cuckoo is a mere bird of passage in this country, its stay seldom lasting over eight or ten weeks from early in May till middle of July. It migrates to Africa and the warmer parts of Asia. There are many varieties of the cuckoo, but only one, and that the ugliest and clumsiest, visits this country.

BASIL.—You mean a dispensing chemist, we presume? A man in business may take you as apprentice, and give you a small wage, but you will have ultimately to pass the pharmaceutical examination, which is sometimes thought pretty stiff. In large towns there are men who prepare students for this exam.

BATH.—If you use a copper teakettle, and have any trouble in keeping it bright, you can remedy the matter by keeping an old dish with sour milk and a cloth in it, and washing the kettle with this every morning, then washing in clean water, wiping dry, and it will always look new and bright.

INTERESTED.—It would be impossible to give any approximate idea of the number of missionaries at work in the various fields. All Christian countries send them, and as many denominations work independently of one another, missionaries are widely scattered. The salaries vary as widely as the localities.

A NEW READER.—"Rev." is a thing of custom, not of law. Any man is free to prefix it to his name, just as he is equally free to call himself professor if he likes. Custom has, however, decreed that an ecclesiastic should not call himself reverend until he is licensed to preach. He need not be ordained.

IGNORAMUS.—Mathematics is the science of accuracy in measurement, in observation, and computation. It is of the greatest practical value in engineering, surveying, and architecture. Mathematics includes specially arithmetic, algebra, and geometry. That may assist in conveying some idea of the place it occupies in education.

MAY DENNIS.—You had better show your hair to a hair-dresser. It will take two or three years to grow to its original length, but there may be some reason for its remaining so short in your case. There does not seem any reason why a lady should object to a good servant because she happened to have short hair. We are very glad to know that you find our paper pleasant and useful.

"LONDON READER."—See answer to "Peony." Probably the flushing of your nose arises from some disturbance of the digestive organs. If not, there is really no cure for it; but bathing in warm or tepid water will sometimes allay it. Some persons say that if you accustom yourself to breathe only through the nose when you are out of doors, keeping the mouth shut, the redness will be much lessened.

R. BLUNDELL.—Your thinness may be constitutional. In that case there may be little use in trying to improve it. There are many prescriptions and exercises for improving the form. The best, undoubtedly, is cold water and light, gentle gymnastics. Too violent exercise takes off the flesh by breaking the fat cells. You need more flesh, and therefore should be very careful about taking any training which tends to disturb the accumulating tissue. Especially avoid the violent use of your arms. Cultivate quiet and repose of manner, sleep all you can.

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